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ROB RUDDER, The Boy Pilot of the Mississippi.

By P. T. RAYMOND.



A dark, shadowy form glided away from the rear of the pilot-house, and crept down the narrow stairs that led to the lower deck.

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Rob Rudder,

— THE —

BOY PILOT OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

P. T. RAYMOND,

Author of "The Mysterious Man of the Mountain," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

It was on a dark, stormy night, several years ago, that saw the Osceola, one of the finest boats on the Mississippi river, rounding to at her wharf, opposite Memphis, Tennessee.

There was the usual excitement attending the arrival and departure of large river steamers; hotel-runners, steamboat men raising their voices above the din, baggage going on and off at the same time, and no end of freight which had to be discharged and received.

The rain was coming down in torrents, but business went on all the same.

The steamer was to leave for New Orleans in an hour, and the energetic captain was determined to be on time.

About a half hour after the arrival of the steamer, a close carriage was driven rapidly down to the wharf.

A tall, white-haired old man alighted and spread an umbrella.

The next moment a beautiful young female emerged from the carriage, enveloped in a water-proof cloak.

She took the old man's arm, and quickly passed down to and up the gang-plank with him.

On board the Osceola, the couple were shown up-stairs to the grand saloon.

At the clerk's office the elderly gentleman registered his name in a round, bold hand:

Samuel Swayne. Tenn.
Miss Belle Swayne.

The clerk looked at the names, and asked: "Do you wish one or two rooms, sir?"

"Two, if you please. My daughter wishes hers to be as near mine as possible."

"Yes, sir; adjoining, if you like."

"Thanks, that will do."

A bright mulatto proceeded to show them to their quarters at once.

In the meantime, a few minutes after the Swaynes came on board, a middle-aged man, with a large valise in his hand, appeared and passed rapidly up the gang-plank.

Going up to the clerk's office, he registered under the name of McCall, and was assigned a state-room nearly opposite to those of the Swaynes.

Scarcely had McCall settled himself in his room ere another man came down to the wharf, valise and umbrella in hand, and passed on board, looking furtively to the right and left, as if half expecting to see some one he knew.

But no one appeared to notice him, and so he passed up to the office, and registered as George Maddox, and was likewise given a room which adjoined McCall's.

In due time the whistle blew, and the huge steamer moved slowly out into the stream.

A half hour later Mr. Swayne re-appeared in the main saloon.

As he was moving towards the front door a man sprang up and confronted him.

"Why, judge!" the stranger exclaimed, extending his hand to the white-haired old man; "how are you? I'm glad to see you!"

"Mr. Simpson!" the judge ejaculated, returning the hand-shake of the other. "I did not expect to see an old friend on board. Where are you going?"

"To Vicksburg," returned Simpson; "and you?"

"We are going to New Orleans, myself and daughter."

"Good! Come, judge, let's have something. They have excellent stuff at the bar below."

The judge—for such he was—bowed assent to the proposition, and together they retired to the bar of the steamboat.

"Do you know Captain McClure, who owns and runs this boat? You ought to know him, judge," said Simpson. "Have a cigar, and then we'll call on the captain."

You are always better off for being acquainted with the captain."

Thus persuaded, Judge Swayne followed his old friend up to the pilot-house.

"Are you in, captain?" Simpson asked.

"Ah! Come in, Simpson," called a gruff, hearty voice; and the door of the little pilot-house was pushed open at the same time. "Come in out of the rain."

"I have a friend with me, captain."

"That's all right. Bring him in. He is my friend too, if he is yours."

"It's my old friend, Judge Swayne," said Simpson, stepping inside the pilot-house.

"Captain McClure, judge."

Both men extended their hands and grasped each other.

"It's a shake in the dark, judge," said the captain. "But I'll risk it on Simpson's responsibility."

"Yes," returned the judge, laughing good-naturedly. "You steamboat men are such a hard lot that you need a voucher, particularly in the dark."

"By all the sand-bars!" exclaimed the captain. "That puts the laugh on me!"

"That was a good one, judge," remarked Simpson, laughing in turn.

"I don't know," said the judge. "I was obliged to return his compliment, you know."

"Yes; and I expected you would," said the captain, chuckling. "I like a man to give me shot for shot and show a spirit of manly independence—eh, Rob, you young rascal?" and he slapped a young man at the wheel on the shoulder.

"Yes, sir, and so do I," said the young man.

"Of course you do. That's the way I raised you. Come, judge, Simpson, let's go down and leave the youngster here by himself. He isn't afraid of anything on the river, from its headspring to the mouth."

The captain turned to lead the way down from the pilot-house, when a brilliant flash of lightning lit up the scene. During the two or three seconds that the flash illumined the scene, Judge Swayne caught the picture of the young pilot, who seemed to him to be a mere boy of some sixteen or seventeen years. He saw him holding firmly to the wheel, and peering into the darkness ahead like a sharp-shooter on the lookout for his foe. The sight made a vivid impression on his mind, and the thought flashed through his brain that the splendid steamer and the lives of all on board were at the mercy of a beardless boy.

All three then made their way down-stairs and into the bar-room of the steamer.

There the captain called for some cigars, and the three sat down to enjoy them.

"How old is your pilot?" the judge asked.

"Rob Rudder isn't twenty years old, judge, yet he is the best pilot on the Mississippi."

Judge Swayne shook his head and remarked:

"Had I known you had a mere boy to pilot you I would never have taken passage on your boat, sir."

The bluff old captain laughed, and then added:

"Age doesn't always bring wisdom, judge, as your experience on the bench has doubtless proven to you. But experience seldom fails in its lesson. That boy of mine has been on the river all his life. He knows every bend, bluff, break or stump from New Orleans to St. Louis, and can read the currents even better than I can, who have been on the river nearly sixty years."

"You do not look so old."

"No. I am not quite sixty, but I was born on a flat-boat, and have lived all my life on some kind of a river craft, and went to school to my mother."

"That young pilot is your son?"

"By adoption. I have never married."

"And you don't know his age?"

"No. When some two or three years old, he was found clinging to the rudder of my boat, after we had been aiding the passengers of a boat which had been blown up by her boiler. No one ever claimed him, and so I adopted him. He said his name was Rob. He could recollect no other, so I concluded to call him Rob Rudder. That's how he came by that name. I kept him always with me, and he showed an aptitude for boating that surprised me. He must have been a regular Mississippi catfish like myself."

"How long has he been a pilot?"

"Two years. He has the best pay of any pilot I know."

CHAPTER II.

WHILST Captain McClure was entertaining his two passengers down below, an incident that shapes the current of our story was occurring up in the grand saloon.

The reader will remember that two men, valises in hand, came on board the steamboat at Memphis and took state-rooms side by side, nearly opposite those of Judge Swayne and his beautiful daughter. They had registered respectively as McCall and Maddox, and retired immediately to their rooms.

No sooner was McCall in his room and the door fastened than he threw aside his cloak and hat, then followed wig and beard, and, instead of a middle-aged man, a young and handsome stranger appeared. He was tall and rather athletic in build and carriage.

"She is on board!" he muttered to himself. "I have seen her. I read her name on the register in her father's handwriting. He is with her, and they are bound for New Orleans. I will find a way to let her know of my presence on board, and then I'll urge my suit. I have stolen a march on Addison. She shall be mine ere the month is out. I'll write her a note and seal it, and watch for a chance to slip it into her hand."

Opening his valise he took therefrom pen, ink and paper, and sat down to write a few lines.

When they were written he folded the sheet and placed it in an envelope. This he put into his coat-pocket and then proceeded to don his disguise again.

In the other state-room adjoining his a similar scene was silently going on. The man Maddox was no other than George Addison in disguise. He was also a desperate suitor for the hand of Belle Swayne, and believed that if he could get a few days the advantage of his rival, Alex Grosvenor, he could win the prize.

Just as McCall came out of his room into the grand saloon, he saw Judge Swayne emerge from his on the opposite side, and start toward the clerk's desk. On the way the meeting with Simpson took place.

He heard the invitation to drink, and saw them go below.

"Ah!" he thought, as the judge and his friend walked away together. "She is alone now. She may come out, and either walk about the saloon or sit down to wait for his return. That would be my golden opportunity, and I'll wait and watch for it. She likes me—maybe loves me. But for her unreasonable old father she would have been mine long ere this. She shall be mine yet, or my name is not Alex Grosvenor."

The disguised young man paced up and down the grand saloon with a nervous impatience that soon attracted the notice of a few of the passengers who were lounging there. They saw that he kept casting eager glances at the door of state-room No. 17.

At this time the man Maddox came out and moved about, also keeping a close watch on the door of state-room No. 17. Two men watching the same object in full view of each other cannot keep their actions very long concealed. In a little while Maddox began to wonder what McCall was watching him and room 17 for. He ceased to watch the room, and turned his attention to McCall.

Suddenly the door of room 17 opened, and Belle Swayne appeared on the threshold.

She glanced up and down the grand saloon in search of her father. Not seeing him, she beckoned to the stewardess.

"Please send word to my father that I wish to see him."

The servant went away in search of Judge Swayne, and Belle stood there, a picture of queenly beauty and innocence, waiting for the return of the stewardess.

Several minutes passed, and the steady gaze of the two men caused her to step back inside and partially close the door.

Seeing the door partially open, McCall turned and walked straight by it. Then he turned and walked back, this time stopping at the door, and threw a small white object inside.

The next moment the door was closed quickly, and he stood by with a wild nervous look on his face.

Maddox saw the whole thing, and sprang forward to his side.

"Who are you, and what do you—"

"Addison!" gasped McCall, recognizing the well known voice of his rival.

"Grosvenor!" ejaculated Addison, in unfeigned amazement.

Then the rivals glared undying hate at each other.

"This world is too small for both of us to live in, Alex Grosvenor," said Addison to his rival.

"Yes, far too small," said Grosvenor, in an undertone.

"Meet me on the hurricane deck, back of the pilot-house, an hour after midnight," Addison said. "To-morrow one of us can have the whole field."

"Yes, that is better," Grosvenor responded. "I'll meet you at one o'clock."

They bowed and turned away, both returning to their respective rooms.

Strange as it may seem to the reader, none of the passengers overheard a word of the half-whispered conversation between the rivals, save the young lady in stateroom 17.

She heard every word, and instantly recognized the voices.

"Good Heaven!" she gasped; "they are on board, and have met! Oh, what shall I do?" and she wrung her hands in deepest anguish.

A few minutes later Judge Swayne returned. The stewardess had met him as he was coming up from below.

"What is it, daughter?" he asked, as he came to her door.

"I couldn't find my trunk key, father," she said. "But never mind now. I can wait till morning."

"Well, good-night, dear," said the judge. Then he went into his own room and went to bed.

Belle Swayne was nearly crazed with anxiety over the situation.

Just then she espied Grosvenor's note on the carpet.

She picked it up and opened it.

There she read the impassioned lines he had written to her, and learned how he had disguised himself so as to elude the vigilance of her father and Addison.

She then suspected that Addison was on board for a similar purpose, and a feeling of gratified pride came up in her heart.

But the thought that one or both might be killed in their fierce rivalry sent a chill to her heart.

"They will meet at one o'clock," she said. "The time can't be far off," and she consulted a tiny gold watch to see what time it was. "Oh, it's twelve o'clock now! In another hour they may meet and kill each other. Oh, it's horrible! They must not meet. They shall not meet."

She threw her large water-proof cloak over her, and thus completely concealed her identity.

Thus attired she softly opened her room door and peered out.

The grand saloon was entirely deserted.

She then stepped softly out, and ran along the saloon to the front end.

Out of the front door she crept, and turned to the little flight of stairs, or, more properly speaking, ladder, that led up to the pilot's house.

Creeping up to the little steeple-like structure, she stopped to listen.

"Mr. Pilot," she called, softly, "may I speak to you a moment?"

"Why, yes! What in the world is the matter, that sends a young lady up here on such a night as this?"

"Are you the pilot?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am; I am one of them. What is the matter?"

"Oh, sir, I am in a world of trouble, and don't know what to do. At one o'clock two gentlemen are to meet up here behind the pilot-house and fight a duel. I overheard them talking while I was in my state-room, and I thought I ought to come up here and tell you about it."

"It's against the rules to stand out there. Here's a chair in here. Come and sit down. There, that's the chair. Now tell me what you want me to do?"

"Why, to prevent the fight, if you can. My father is on board with me, and I wouldn't have them to fight for anything in the world. Can you prevent a fight?"

"Well, I don't know, but I can try. What are they going to fight about?"

To his surprise she did not answer the question, and remained silent.

"Which one shall I help?" he asked, with a view to ascertain which she liked best.

"Excuse me, sir," she said. "I am not a silly school-girl. I am not interested in either, except as a mere friend."

"Pardon me, lady. I didn't mean to be impertinent. I only—"

A sudden flash of lightning came, and gave each a glance of the other's face. He was awazed at her beauty, and she saw enough of him to inspire her with confidence. He appeared to be a mere boy, but there was such an air of self-reliance and manliness about him, that she felt drawn toward him almost irresistibly.

"Do you know what time it is now?" she asked.

"I can tell in a minute," he said, and he opened a small case near his side and took therefrom a small lantern of the bull's-eye make, which cast almost electric rays in any given direction. By the light thus provided, he noted the time. It lacked yet some twenty minutes to one o'clock.

"Oh, sir," she nervously ejaculated, "can't you summon the captain and have him interfere?"

"Ah! There comes two steamers around the bend! Just keep your seat, lady, till we pass them, and then we will attend to the two gentlemen," and he turned the wheel with a vigor that amazed the young lady, whilst the two steamers came coughing and blowing toward the Osceola.

CHAPTER III.

THE two steamers were more than a mile away when first seen coming round the bend. Yet the young pilot fairly climbed up on his wheel in his efforts to guide the monster boat under his charge. The strong current and the immense size of the Osceola required both time and elbow room in which to maneuver.

One of the steamers had made some kind of a mistake in whistling the signal, and in an instant all three were waking up the echoes for ten miles around with their hoarse, heavy whistles.

Passengers sprang out of beds, and eagerly inquired what the matter was; and a little excitement prevailed on all three steamers.

"Is there any danger?" Belle asked of the young pilot.

"Yes, miss, there is," he said; "but the greatest is in getting excited."

The great lights came nearer and nearer; and the voices of the men on each steamer could be heard.

Belle Swayne sprang to her feet, and glared wildly down from the pilot-house.

To make the scene more terrible, a vivid flash of lightning came, which paled the lanterns and torches on the boats for several seconds.

But in that flash there came to Belle Swayne's view a sight that filled her soul with horror unspeakable. She saw Grosvenor and Addison emerging above the entrance to the hurricane deck, and knew that in another minute or two she would hear them engaged in a death-struggle within a few feet of her.

"There they are! They have come up on the deck," she gasped.

"Keep quiet, lady," said the young pilot, never once releasing his hold on the wheel.

"There's danger to us all now!"

"How can I bear to hear them?" she groaned, and she sank back down on the chair and thrust her fingers into her ears to shut out the sound of the coming struggle.

The young pilot could pay no attention to her just then.

The danger that menaced the steamer absorbed every faculty of mind and body.

Suddenly a voice was heard on the deck behind the pilot-house:

"We fire at the next flash of lightning!"

It was the voice of Addison.

"Yes, at the next flash," said Alex Grosvenor, hissing the words through his clenched teeth.

"And I'll settle the survivor with a load of buckshot!" cried Rob Rudder, the pilot, in a very stern tone of voice, loud enough for both men to hear.

"What have you to do with us?" Addison asked.

"Nothing, except to kill the survivor," was

the reply. "That's the rule on board this boat."

"The survivor can take care of himself," said Grosvenor.

"Not after I get through with him," replied Rob. "I've got two barrels loaded with buckshot. You can't come up here gunning and leave me out of the game," and he kept pulling at the wheel and watching the lights of the other boats.

Belle Swayne listened with her heart way up in her throat.

In her supreme agony she turned her face pleadingly up to the young pilot, and groaned:

"Save them! Don't let them kill each other!"

But just then came the supreme moment of the peril that menaced the steamers. The two huge vessels grazed each other so closely as to cause both to sway suddenly.

That caused George Addison to lose his balance and fall overboard, dropping down among the deck-hands of the other steamer.

He made no noise—or if he did, it was drowned by the excitement of the collision. The deck-hands were amazed, however, to see him drop down into their midst with a cocked revolver in his hand. They took him up, stunned and bruised, and carried him up in the main saloon.

Alexander Grosvenor, not knowing what had happened to his rival, stood there on the deck, revolver in hand, waiting for a flash of lightning to enable him to sight him.

Just two minutes after the collision Belle Swayne sprang to her feet and looked out of the rear of the pilot-house into the darkness beyond.

A blinding flash of lightning came.

She saw but one man standing out there on the top of the boat. It was Alexander Grosvenor. She recognized him in the lightning's glare.

A pistol shot was heard. Grosvenor had fired.

Belle heard the shot, saw the flash, saw only Grosvenor, and yet could not repress a wild shriek as the shot echoed over the great river.

Then she fell back into the chair in a death-like swoon.

But Grosvenor heard her shriek and recognized her voice.

Filled with maddened jealousy, he ran forward, and came up against the pilot-house with such force as to smash the window and send the glass in a shower all over Rob and Belle.

"Hello!" exclaimed Rob. "What do you mean by running into me that way?"

"Where is she—where is she?" demanded the half-crazed lover.

"Whom do you mean?"

"She whose voice I heard just now. Where is she? Tell me, or by Heaven I'll put a bullet into you! She is mine! He shall not have her!"

"If you don't take yourself off I'll have you thrown overboard, you lunatic!" said Rob.

Just then another flash of lightning came, bright and blinding in its vividness.

He saw Belle lying in a heap on the floor of the pilot-house, where she had fallen from a chair. Rob saw her at the same time.

"Villain! Fiend!" yelled Grosvenor, "you have killed her! Die like a dog!"

He stretched out his hand and fired at the spot where he saw the young pilot standing during the lightning's flash.

Fortunately Rob had stooped to take hold of the unconscious maiden and raise her up with one hand, while with the other he held on to the wheel.

The moment after he fired, Grosvenor came through the window like a catapult, landing almost on the top of the young pilot. The revolver fell from his hand, and the young hero kicked it away with his foot as he stepped on it.

Without uttering a word Rob Rudder seized him by the throat, and a terrible struggle for the mastery commenced.

The door of the pilot-house burst open, and the two combatants rolled out on the deck.

"I'll kill you!" hoarsely growled the maddened lover.

But the young pilot was used to rough-and-tumble fights like that, and was perfectly at home in a scrimmage. Suddenly he rose to his feet. Grosvenor rose with him, and the terrible struggle continued. Quick as a flash Rob hurled him over his shoulder into the seething waters below!

CHAPTER IV.

YOUNG Bob Rudder stood like one in a dream for a moment or two after he had hurled his assailant overboard.

He realized the peril he had been in, and was even amazed at the ease with which he had escaped.

"Oh, where am I?" he heard a voice speak, just behind him.

He wheeled round and ran against Belle Swayne, who had come out of the pilot-house and was trying to feel her way down-stairs again.

"My God, miss!" he exclaimed, catching her in his arms, "you will walk overboard!"

"Save me!" she gasped, sinking into his arms the moment she heard his voice and felt his arms around her.

He carried her back into the pilot-house, placed her on the chair again and seized the wheel. Scarcely two minutes had elapsed since he released his hold on the wheel to protect himself from Grosvenor's onslaught; yet he feared the steamer had veered from her course.

"Oh, tell me what has happened!" cried Belle. "I heard a shot and then I knew no more. I must have fainted."

"So you did," he answered, pulling hard on the wheel. "But you are all right now."

"I saw the shot, and one man. The other was not on the deck at the time."

"Then no one was shot, I am sure," said Rob.

"But what became of the other one? Have you seen him?"

"Yes, I saw him once."

"What was he doing then?"

"Trying to throw me overboard."

"And you?"

"Threw him over," was the quiet reply.

"Oh, my God! It's perfectly horrible!"

"Yes, indeed. But I didn't care to go over, you know."

"I would like to go down to my room. Can you show me the way?"

"I can't leave my post," he answered, "but can show you the way."

He took the dark-lantern out of its little case, and turned its bull's-eye rays toward the place which led down to the main saloon.

"Miss, will you please give me your name?" he asked. "I am Rob Rudder, one of the pilots of this boat."

"Yes, sir. I am Belle Swayne, of Tennessee. My father, Judge Swayne, is on board. We are going to New Orleans."

"Thanks, Miss Swayne. Now, as there were no witnesses of what has taken place up here to-night, except you and I, suppose we keep dark and say nothing about it."

"Oh, I wouldn't say anything about it for the world."

She then left the pilot-house, and went back the way she had come. Fortunately, she did not meet with any one on the way down, and in a few minutes she was safe in her room where she threw herself on the bed and gave way to a passionate fit of weeping.

About a half hour after Belle Swayne left the young pilot, Captain McClure came up.

"That was a close rub, my boy," he said, as he leaned against the pilot-house.

"Yes, sir; a mighty close shave," replied Rob. "Both steamers seemed disposed to crowd us."

"So I thought—why, hello! What broke your window?"

"A passenger came up here and ran against it in the dark."

"Well, there's lots of fools traveling about in the world," remarked the bluff old captain.

"Yes, and I think he was one of them. I believe he went overboard."

"The deuce!"

"Yes, sir. Some of 'em were badly scared."

"I'll make the clerk make out the names to-morrow, and find out who is missing."

The captain returned below and retired to his berth, leaving his second in command in charge of the boat.

The night passed away, and the sun rose bright and clear in a cloudless sky. Rob was relieved by the day pilot, and went below to get his breakfast. An hour or so later he went to his berth, where he generally slept till high noon.

In the meantime, the captain had instructed the clerk to ascertain, as soon as he could, if all the passengers were still on board.

"Rob says he thinks a man went over-

board last night," he said, as he gave the order.

The news soon spread, and in a little while all the passengers assembled in the grand saloon to hear the worst of it. There, when the list of passengers was called off, it was found out that Maddox and McCall were missing.

A search was made for them. The boat was ransacked to find them, but nothing could be found of them. Their rooms were searched, and their baggage taken possession of.

Captain McClure went to Rob's berth and spoke to him just as the young pilot was rising.

"There are two men missing, Rob," he said. "Did you see two up there last night?"

"No, sir. I heard two, though."

"What in the name of goodness did they go up there for?"

"One of 'em must have been crazy," remarked Rob, "for he acted like a lunatic."

"Yes, he must have been crazy. Nobody on board seem to know anything about them. They registered as from Tennessee."

Rob made no further comments, and the captain went back to the passengers to report that the pilot remembered hearing two men up on the hurricane deck, just before meeting the two steamers, a little after midnight.

Belle Swayne came out of her room about noon and heard the news. Her heart almost ceased to beat, and her face paled to almost ashen hue.

She shuddered, and watched, and waited for a chance to speak to Rob Rudder. She had slept but little for thinking of him and the incidents of the night.

At last he made his appearance.

He recognized the beautiful face the lighting had shown to him the night before, and lifted his hat to her.

She returned his bow, and gave him a look that brought him to her side.

"They are both gone," she whispered, as he came up to where she was sitting.

"Yes, so it seems," and he gazed so ardently at her lovely face, now pale with anxiety and loss of sleep, as to cause her no little embarrassment. "But I somehow have the impression on my mind that they both escaped drowning. We were not more than two hundred fathoms from the shore when they disappeared. They may have swam out. Who knows?"

She looked up at his dauntless face, and there read the indomitable spirit that enabled him to act as he did the night before.

"Have you been questioned about it?" she asked him, after a pause of several minutes.

"Oh, yes. I told the captain that I heard two men talking behind me a little after midnight, but that I could not see who they were."

CHAPTER V.

BELLE SWAYNE was about to ask him another question, when she saw her father, Judge Swayne, approaching them. She knew he would think it strange that she had made the acquaintance of a gentleman so soon after coming on board.

But she was not a girl to be easily dashed. The judge came up and bowed, giving his daughter an inquiring look as he did so.

"Father," she said, "this gentleman is the pilot of the boat, Mr. Rudder. My father is Judge Swayne, Mr. Rudder."

Judge Swayne was very aristocratic in his associations, and as he recognized the young pilot, whose face he saw the night before during a flash of lightning, he became rather stiff and distant in his manner toward him.

Rob was not slow to notice the change, and so became as stiff himself as he acknowledged the introduction.

"We met last night in the pilot-house, judge," he said, simply to be saying something.

"Yes, I recollect you," returned the judge, coldly.

"Why, father!" exclaimed Belle, in no little surprise, "were you on the pilot-house deck last night?"

"Yes, a few minutes. I met my old friend Simpson, who insisted on my going up there to see the captain. Captain McClure is an old friend of his, and he wanted me to make his acquaintance."

The judge was about to make an inquiry as to how she and the young pilot became

acquainted, when Simpson came up and grasped Rob by the hand.

"Rob, you young rogue," he said, laughing, "you always manage to get acquainted with the best-looking girl on board every trip."

Belle blushed like a young schoolgirl, and said:

"Thanks for the compliment, Mr. Simpson. You were always partial to me, you know."

"Yes, and so is everybody else. Come, judge, let's leave these young people together, and go off to ourselves."

Judge Swayne would rather have refused the invitation, but under the circumstances, he did not.

Rob looked after him a minute or two, as if half disposed to follow his example, when Belle said to him:

"My father and Mr. Simpson are very old friends."

"Mr. Simpson is an old friend of mine also," replied Rob. "I have known him pretty much all my life."

"Did you ever live in this town?"

"No; I never lived in any town that I can remember. I have been on the river all my life."

She looked at him in silence for some time, and then asked:

"Do you ever get tired of the river?"

"No; I am very fond of the water," he replied.

"Well, I am, too," she said. "But I think I would get tired of it if I had to stay on it all the time. It would become very monotonous."

Just then a whistle blew, and on looking out, Rob saw a well-known fast steamer moving out into the river, after having taken on a supply of wood.

Belle Swayne arose and went out on the open deck to look at the steamer. She stood by the young pilot's side, who said:

"That's the Peacock—a very fast boat. They have often boasted that she could beat us. The captain says she can't do it. Ah! That whistle means a challenge to a race. There goes our whistle! Captain McClure won't back down from a race with anything on this river!"

Belle saw that he was excited, and asked:

"Do you think our boat can beat the other?"

"You don't know the speed of the Osceola. She has never been beaten yet," was the proud reply of the young pilot. "They have some two or three hundred yards the advantage of us, but we will soon wipe 'em out."

It soon became known that a race between the two boats was going on.

No wonder, then, that everybody became excited and cheered. The lady passengers waved their handkerchiefs and grew as much interested as the men did.

The Osceola slowly gained on her rival, and the latter crowded on the steam and strained every piece of her machinery in her mad effort to keep the lead.

"Are we gaining on her, Mr. Rudder?"

Belle Swayne asked the young pilot a dozen times during the first hour of the race.

"Yes, steadily," was the reply. "In another hour we will catch up."

Captain McClure came by and stopped. He was surprised at finding Rob with Judge Swayne's beautiful daughter.

"Oh, captain!" cried Belle; "will you win the race?"

"Oh, yes—or burst my boiler," was the emphatic reply.

"Oh, I do hope we won't have any accidents!"

"No danger of that on this boat," remarked the captain, with an emphasis that at once disarmed her fears.

The gallant boat fairly quivered under the ponderous strokes of the engines. Cheer after cheer rose from crew and passengers as she gradually crept up almost alongside the Peacock. In a little while the two rivals were side by side, and then the terrific struggle reached the zenith of intensity.

Passengers of both boats crowded to the side next to each other, and yelled and cheered in the wildest excitement. Those on the Peacock saw they were about to be distanced, and yelled to their captain to beat 'em at every hazard.

"More steam down there!" yelled the captain to his engineer.

A few more pounds were crowded on, and

the boat staggered and shivered under it as though struck by an ague.

Suddenly an awful roar, followed by shrieks and hissing steam, burst upon the astonished passengers, and half the Peacock went up in the air in a cloud of steam and smoke.

She had burst her boiler.

CHAPTER VI.

THE roar of the explosion was something truly terrific. It seemed to shake the universe. The air was filled with smoke and escaping steam. Fragments of the boat and limbs of human beings were sent up in a confused mass. Many pieces of both were dropped on the deck of the Osceola.

Ere the roar of the explosion ceased, an awful cry of human agony came up from the doomed boat.

Several passengers on board the Osceola were hurt by flying fragments, and a cry went up from some of them. Instantly a panic seized the other passengers, and a wild scramble for life-preservers was the result.

"Oh, save me!—save me!" cried Belle Swayne, panic-stricken like the rest, and believing that the boat was going to the bottom at railroad speed.

Rob caught her by the arm, and said to her in clear, cold tones:

"There is no danger. It's all over with now. The explosion was on the other boat."

"But see this blood on my dress."

"Yes—that came from the other boat. When you get over your excitement, you can change your dress."

And he persuaded her to stay by his side until the nervous fit of frantic excitement was over with.

The pilot in charge of the boat promptly reversed the engine by signals to the engineer, and went back to the assistance of the unfortunates in the water and on the wreck.

The moment the Osceola came near enough for a close inspection, our hero saw several people struggling in the water.

"My God!" he exclaimed, stung to sudden activity. "There's a woman and child in the water!"

He almost flung Belle Swayne from him, threw off his coat, and then plunged headlong overboard.

But a minute or so later she saw him rise and strike boldly out for the woman and child, who were but a little ways off. Ere he reached them, however, both mother and child had gone down.

Belle watched them and the gallant young pilot with breathless interest, and when she saw them go down under the merciless water, she screamed out to him:

"Save them! Oh, for Heaven's sake, save them!"

He swam to the spot where he last saw them, and then dived in search of them. He struck against the half-drowned mother, who was still clinging to her babe, and brought her to the surface.

Clasping her around the waist with one arm, he held up the babe with the other; then, with his feet in constant motion, he kept all three heads above the water. But he could not do much swimming, thus cumbered. He held them above the water, and floated with the current; that was all he could do.

There was only one on board the Osceola who did not lose sight of him. That one was Belle Swayne. She kept her eye on him all the time, and saw that he kept the child and its mother above the water.

At last, when he had drifted so far that no one on the boat could hear his voice, he turned his attention to the two unfortunates in his charge, and found that the mother had revived considerably.

"Keep cool, ma'am," he said to her, "and we'll get out all right."

"My baby!" gasped the mother.

"Is safe. Here it is!" and he held the babe up so she could see it.

"Thank God!" she cried, and almost fainted.

"Are you strong enough to hold to me if I let you go?" he asked.

"Yes, I think I am."

"Then take a good grip on my collar and hold to it. I will then have an arm free to swim with."

She did as she was told, and took a good hold of his collar. He then held the babe with one hand, and with the other struck out for the bank.

It was slow, tedious work, but in a little over a half hour he reached the bank, and pulled them up on to the green grass.

"My dear husband was on board with us," she said, after rising to her feet. "I saw nothing of him at or after the explosion. I am afraid he was hurt."

"A good many were hurt," said he; "but we will hope for the best. We are more than a mile below the wreck, which has floated down to that bar. Can you walk up there? I'll carry the baby."

She thought she could walk up all the way, but found that she was too weak to do so without stopping and resting twice. Rob carried the baby, and spoke encouragingly to her on the way.

By and by they reached a spot opposite the Osceola and the wreck of the Peacock.

He made several ineffectual signals to attract attention. But he was too far away for them to see who he was, or recognize his voice. They were too busy with the wreck and unfortunate passengers.

"If you will stay here," he said, turning to the mother, "I will go up a little higher and swim out with the current. I'll get a boat and come back after you."

"Then if you go, please ask if a Mr. Watterman is alive," she said.

"He is your husband?"

"Yes; we've been married three years!"

"I'll bring you good news—keep up a good heart. If I wave a white object from the boat you may know that he is all right."

"Oh, thanks; you are so kind!"

He started off up the river's bank a quarter of a mile or so and plunged in.

Striking boldly out into the current, he gained rapidly, and in a little while he was in hailing distance of the Osceola, which had anchored near the wreck.

"Why, that's Rob Rudder!" exclaimed the pilot, recognizing his voice even at that distance. "What in blazes are you doing out there, Rob?"

They instantly sent a boat out to meet and take him out of the water.

As he climbed into the boat, Rob asked of the two rowers:

"How many were killed?"

"The good Lord only knows," was the reply.

"The clerk and his book are both gone."

"That's bad. Many hurt?"

"Yes, a good many. How did you get into the water?"

"I jumped in to save a mother and her child. Their chances were desperate. The current took us down some distance. But I got 'em safely on shore. There they are now, out on a log waiting for a boat to take 'em on board again," and he pointed to Mrs. Watterman sitting on a log on shore, with her babe to her breast.

The two men looked away in the direction indicated, and saw the mother and babe safe on dry land.

"God bless you, Rob!" said one of the men, holding out his brawny palm to the young pilot. "It was just like you to do that. You don't know that Captain McClure was killed, do you?"

Rob turned deathly pale, and sprang to his feet.

"My God!" he gasped. "Do you tell me that for truth?"

"Yes; he and three passengers were killed by flying pieces from the wreck. A white-haired old man was one of them, and his daughter has just gone wild with grief, and—God! Look there!"

They were near the Osceola, and at that moment a beautiful young lady, with a large splotch of blood on the bosom of her dress, gave a wild, maniacal shriek and sprang head foremost overboard into the seething waters of the river.

CHAPTER VII.

As the young woman struck the water, Rob Rudder plunged out of the boat, and dived in her direction.

When he came up to the surface he held her in his arms, buoying her up so as to keep her head above the water.

"Go after him with that boat there!" cried Duncan, the day pilot, turning to the boat from which Rob had made his plunge.

The boat started in pursuit of the gallant young pilot and the maiden, whilst the others looked in breathless suspense.

In the meantime, Belle Swayne, chilled by the water, had recovered consciousness to

find herself in Rob Rudder's arms, and floating down the river.

"You are safe now," said Rob. "A boat is coming after us."

She looked at him a moment or two and said:

"I want to die. My father is dead and I am alone in the world. I don't want to live. Let me die!"

"No, no!" said Rob. "You feel that way now, but you must not kill yourself. Suicide is murder. Keep up your courage. Live for your friends. They will love you."

He talked so rapidly and so cheerfully that she did not utter another word to him till the boat came up to them. Then she again said, in the saddest tones he ever heard:

"Let me die! I don't want to live!"

"No, no—you can't die now!" he replied.

"Here, help her in, Dick."

The man addressed reached out both hands and lifted her into the boat. Rob followed and sat down by her side.

She was pale, sad and shivering.

"Have you seen him?" she asked.

"Seen whom?"

"My poor father. Half his head is blown off. Oh, oh!" and she buried her face in her hands and sobbed convulsively.

"I feel sorry for you," he said, in his softest tones.

The boat returned to the Osceola, and the young maiden was lifted on board again.

"Keep a watch on her," whispered Rob to the stewardess. "She might try to drown herself."

The stewardess took her to the state-room, and assisted her in putting on dry clothing.

Rob then turned his attention to his foster-father, Captain McClure.

The captain, with Simpson and Judge Swayne, was standing near the edge of the lower deck of the Osceola, on the side next to the Peacock.

When the explosion came a heavy piece of timber struck all three on their heads. They were all about the same height. They were instantly killed, their heads being literally crushed out of shape or recognition.

The moment Rob saw the body of his foster-father, he fell down on his knees by it and burst into tears.

"Oh, my father!" he sobbed, "why could not I have died for you? You were too good, too brave, too generous to die thus! In all the wide world no better man ever lived! You were more than a friend to me—more than a father!"

He called the clerk to him, and said:

"When I am in the pilot-house you must take charge here as captain. Until then you are second in command. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the clerk.

"We will see that the wounded of the Peacock are carried down the river to their destinations. Get their names and baggage if you can."

"The Greyhound is coming down the river," said the clerk, as a large fine steamer loomed up in the distance.

"Hail her and see if she will give us any help."

Orders were given to hail the Greyhound as she came down near the wreck, and it was done.

The steamer came up and cast anchor near the Osceola. Her passengers were horror-struck at the awful destruction of life and property that had taken place. Many of them came on board and talked with the passengers and crew of the Osceola.

"We picked up one of your passengers in the river last night," said the captain of the Greyhound to the Osceola's clerk.

"Ah! Did you? We lost two men last night during the storm."

"Yes; a man by the name of McCall was found floating on a plank. He hailed us and we took him up. Shall I send him on board?"

"Of course, if he wishes to come. He has the key of his room with him."

The captain sent word for McCall to come on board the Osceola.

But he was already on board and in his old room, glad beyond words to express to be back again.

When both steamers were on their way down the river with the well and wounded passengers of the unfortunate Peacock, Alex Grosvenor, who still passed as James McCall, came out of the room he had occupied before he was thrown into the water, and asked the stewardess:

"Who is captain of this boat now?"

"I don't know, sir. Mr. Rob Rudder, the pilot, is, I guess."

He looked grave.

The thought ran through his mind that perhaps the young pilot may have recognized him as his assailant in the pilot-house the night before, and might seek to have him arrested.

When some fifty miles below the place of disaster Belle Swayne had recovered herself, and sent for Rob to come to her in the main saloon.

Rob came, and she gave him her hand.

"I wanted to thank you," she said, "for you seem to be the only friend I have in all the wide world."

Rob pressed her hand and remained silent.

"You saved my life," she continued, "though you would have done me a kinder service had you left me to find a grave in the water."

"No, no!" he said. "You will not say that a month from now. You are too young to die yet, Miss Swayne. You have too many friends."

She did not seem to hear what he was saying:

"You saved the mother and her babe, did you not?" she asked.

"Yes. I carried them ashore and left them on a log, while I swam back for a boat. They are both on board now, and happy, for the husband and father escaped with only a slight bruise. Have you any directions to give in regard to your father's body?"

"Yes. Telegraph to Joseph Seguin, on St. Charles street, that my father, Judge Swayne, is dead, and that the body is on the way down. He will know what to do."

"I shall have everything done as you wish," said Rob.

"Thanks. You are so kind to me. I'll never forget your kindness."

"Nor will I ever forget you," said Rob, pressing her hand, "for we both have lost our fathers at the same moment, and—"

"Oh, forgive me!" she cried. "In my great grief at my own loss I forgot yours. I feel for you so deeply. It's terrible to lose a father."

"Thanks," said Rob in a low tone. "We know how to feel for each other. I have neither father nor mother."

He could not stay longer at her side.

Duty called him elsewhere, and he hastened away.

Now, there was one person who saw and heard all that passed at that interview between the maiden and the young pilot. He was no other than Alex Grosvenor, still known on the passenger list as James McCall.

The moment Rob was out of sight, and just before Belle Swayne reached the door of her room, he sprang forward and caught her hand in both of his.

CHAPTER VIII.

"MISS BELLE! Miss Belle!" exclaimed Grosvenor, pressing her hand in both his, and looking pleadingly up to her face, "you know me—your best friend in all the world."

"Why, Mr. Grosvenor!" she gasped, her face changing several colors in as many seconds. "How did you escape? We all believed you were drowned last night!"

"It was a miracle, Miss Belle," he replied. "God only knows how I escaped. I went down, down, down until I lost consciousness. Then I came to the surface again, I suppose. My head struck against a plank. I seized it and buoyed myself up on it till that steamer out there, the Greyhound, came by and picked me up. God knows it was a narrow enough escape. But you—you have lost your father. How I feel for you! How you must suffer! You are too good to be thus left all alone in the world."

She tried to draw her hand away from him, but he held to it tenaciously, and imprinted a burning kiss on it, when she snatched it away by main force and said:

"You are in disguise, Mr. Grosvenor. I know the cause of it, and am pained that you should have done as you did."

"But you will pardon the act when you know why I did it," he said.

"No, I cannot, because you sought the life of one who was my preserver."

"Who—Addison?"

"No—the young pilot of this boat. You tried to kill him last night."

"Yes, I was beside myself on seeing you lying in a heap at his feet—I thought he had

killed you. My God, Belle Swayne, I would wade through a sea of blood for you!"

"You have told me such things before, Mr. Grosvenor," said she, trying to withdraw her hand. "They can have no effect on me."

"Ah! your heart is full of grief now. My devotion to you will fill it with love," and he imprinted a burning kiss on her hand ere releasing it.

The moment she felt herself released she darted into her room and shut the door.

Grosvenor returned to his own, trembling with joy that he had spoken to her and again declared his love.

He believed that Addison was dead—that he had lost his balance and fallen overboard on that eventful night. The young pilot was the only one he had to fear. If he was disposed to push the law on him for attempt to kill, he would fare badly.

"He seems to be a brave young fellow," he said to himself. "Brave men are generous and forgiving. I'll make an apology to him and settle that at once. If he is disposed to be ugly, Belle can say a word or two that will settle it. But I don't think he'll be hard on a man whom he threw overboard on a dark night. I'll go out and look him up."

Carefully inspecting his disguise, he went out and promenaded around until he saw Rob Rudder talking to the clerk. Waiting till he was through he stepped up to Rob and extended his hand.

Rob recognized the face, which a flash of lightning had revealed to him on the deck the night before, as that of his mad assailant.

"You are the pilot, are you not?" Grosvenor asked.

"Yes—one of 'em," was the reply.

"My name is McCall. You cast me overboard last night. The Greyhound picked me up. I want to apologize to you for my unjustifiable conduct toward you. I beg your pardon, sir; I was in a frame of mind bordering on insanity, and not until I was in the water did I come to my senses."

Rob was very much surprised at what the man said. But he could not go back of the apology.

"That's all right, sir," he said. "I thought something was the matter with you. It's all right now. Glad you didn't stay to feed the fishes. But what went with the other man?"

McCall started.

"What other man?" he asked.

"Maddox. You both went up there to fight, you know."

"Ah! I see you know more that I thought you did," said McCall. "We did go up there to settle a difficulty. We were to fire in a flash of lightning. But when it came he was not there. He had disappeared altogether."

"But a shot was fired."

"Yes—I fired the moment it came in the direction I knew him to be, but I never saw him."

"Where was he standing?"

"At the farther end of the boat."

"Why did you try to shoot me?"

McCall looked him in the face for a minute or two, and then asked:

"Do you know why Maddox and I were enemies?"

Rob was not disposed to let him know that Belle Swayne had let him into the secret of their rivalry, and so made an evasive answer by saying:

"I don't seek to know anything of your personal affairs."

"Can you explain why she was up there in the pilot-house?"

"Not without her consent," replied Rob, shaking his head.

McCall was amazed, and glared at the young pilot in a way that caused him to say:

"Would you violate a lady's confidence, sir?"

"No," he replied.

"Nor would I. As her father's dead body is not yet in the grave, I would suggest that we say no more about the matter at present."

Late that afternoon they reached Vicksburg, where Rob telegraphed to New Orleans the news of the disaster to the Peacock and Osceola, and that the bodies of Judge Swayne and Captain McClure were on their way to the city for burial. The body of Simpson was put off there to be sent back to his late home.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN night came on Rob went up to the pilot-house to relieve Dan Duncan, the day pilot.

He took his stand at the wheel, and old Dan went down to get his supper, have a smoke, and then turn in for the night.

He had not been long at his post when the clerk came to him and said:

"Five passengers came on board at Vicksburg, but only four of them registered, and—"

"Well, where's the fifth man?"

"That's what I am going to tell you. I put one of them in Room 18—the one Maddox, the missing man, had. When the stewardess went to open it with her pass-key, she found it occupied by Maddox—the missing man."

"Now, look here!" exclaimed Rob; "you want to get thrown overboard?"

"No, sir. I am telling you the truth. It's Maddox. I knew his face the moment I saw him. He said he fell off the hurricane deck last night, and got caught on one of those two steamers we rubbed against. He got off at the next town and took the train for Vicksburg, and came on board there."

The clerk, who was deputized to act as captain for the night, went back down-stairs, and resolved to keep an eye on the two men. He was greatly troubled to know what the mystery was that surrounded the two men—Maddox and McCall.

He was in his office attending to some clerical work, when Maddox and McCall met face to face in the grand saloon.

McCall was dumfounded.

In fact, he at first thought he had run upon Maddox's ghost, and that idea was not dispersed until Maddox spoke.

"Ah! you thought I was out of the way, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"But I am not, you see."

"No; but you must get out of my way," hissed McCall.

Both men placed their hands on their revolvers and glared fiercely at each other.

Just then the clerk saw them and hastened up to where they were standing facing each other.

"Gentlemen," he said, "if you quarrel on board this boat you will both be arrested and locked up till you reach your destinations."

They were surprised.

"By what right do you threaten to arrest anybody?" Maddox demanded, turning fiercely upon him.

"By the right we have to protect our boat and passengers," was the reply. "When you reach your destination, you can fight all you want, but you can't do it on this boat."

"He is right," said McCall, in a low tone of voice. "We can settle our affair in New Orleans. I shall stop at the St. Charles. Where can I send a friend to you?"

"At the City Hotel," was the reply.

The two men bowed and separated, and the clerk hastened up to the pilot-house to inform Rob of what had occurred.

He then returned below, and was passing through the grand saloon, when Belle Swayne came out of her room and said to him:

"I wish to see Mr. Rudder. Where is he?"

"He is up in the pilot-house on duty," was the reply, "and cannot leave his post."

"Would it be against the rules for me to go up there and see him?" she asked.

"Oh, no, ma'am. Shall I show you up?"

"If you will be so kind."

He led the way out of the saloon, and up the stairway to the hurricane deck. She followed him in silence, and, in another minute or two, was again in the pilot-house.

"A lady wishes to see you," said the clerk, as he opened the door to admit her.

"Ah! take a seat, Miss Swayne!" exclaimed Rob, in no little surprise, for he recognized her in the clear starlight.

The clerk turned away, and Belle stood up by Rob's side and said:

"I come to you because I feel that you are my best friend."

"Oh, thank you for that, Miss Swayne," said Rob. "What is troubling you now?"

"That other man who was missing. He has returned, and is on the boat."

"Yes—Maddox. He got on at Vicksburg. He made a narrow escape."

"He has met the other, and they are going to fight a duel to the death when they reach the city."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. I knew their voices and heard what they had said. I was in my room. Oh, what can I do to prevent a fight? The whole world will hear of it, and I shall die if my name gets in the papers."

"Do you like one any better than the other?"

"No. Nor do I like either of them as well as I do you, for you have saved my life at the risk of your own."

Rob felt a thrill of joy shoot through his heart at her emphatic declaration. Why, he did not himself know. It was vague and undefined, but it was a joy nevertheless.

During the silence that followed, a dark, shadowy form glided away from the rear of the pilot-house, and crept down the narrow stairs that led to the lower deck.

It was McCall—Grosvenor.

As he came into the light his face was ashen-hued in color, and a gleam of desperation shone in his eyes. His fingers clutched and his whole form quivered, as if convulsed with an ague.

"It shall not be!" he hissed, through clenched teeth and pallid lips. "She shall be mine, or death shall claim us both. I no longer fear Addison. She does not love him. She says she does not love either of us. She loves that young pilot. She almost told him so. Perdition seize him! I'll kill him! He shall not have her!"

CHAPTER X.

THE young lady remained seated in the pilot-house nearly an hour, and wept and sobbed like one who could not be comforted. The young pilot's heart was touched.

"You don't know how much I feel for you," he said, repeatedly. "I would do anything to serve you and to relieve your mind of all trouble and care. I will do my best to persuade those two gentlemen not to fight about a lady whom neither of them can ever hope to win."

She remained silent for several minutes after that, thinking of her dead father, the two rivals, the young pilot, and the terrible scenes of the last twenty-four hours. Surely she had enough to think about.

Suddenly she turned to the pilot, and said:

"But they may fight after all."

"Yes, that's true."

"What shall I do then?"

"Nothing. You can do nothing, except to deny that you encouraged them in any way."

A bend in the river was at hand, and he had to pull hard on the wheel for the next half hour. There was no leisure time then, and so she sat there in silence, and looked out over the dark waters of the great river.

When the bend was passed the terrible pull on the wheel was relaxed.

"Are you not very tired?"

She asked the question looking up at him in the somber starlight.

"No; not much," he replied.

"Would you not rather be day pilot?"

"Yes; it would be more pleasant. But Duncan won't run at night."

"Who is Duncan?"

"The day pilot."

"Why won't he run at night?"

"He is a little superstitious—like most pilots. He was once a night pilot, and ran over a skiff containing an old Spaniard down below Baton Rouge. The poor fellow was never seen afterwards. He yelled at the boat just before he was struck. Duncan says that on dark, stormy nights the old Spaniard would climb up to the pilot-house, and yell at him to sheer off."

She trembled and turned pale, for her vivid imagination pictured the ghastly form and face of the dead man at the window of the pilot-house.

"So that's why I take the night run," he continued. "Old Duncan said he wouldn't stay on board if he had to do the night work. He's a good pilot, and has been with us a long time."

She thought how kind, brave and generous it was of him to take the old pilot's place, and stand there all through the long nights.

It was growing late. She knew she must go, and so she arose and said:

"You have been so kind to me that I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't try to do it, please," he said. "But look on me as your best friend, and let me so regard you."

She passed out of the little pilot-house and started across to the head of the little flight of stairs that led below. He was gazing after her with an intense longing that caused her shadowy form in the somber starlight to seem like the loveliest vision he had ever gazed upon in all his life.

Suddenly he seemed to see another form rise up by her side and throw a pair of arms about her. At first he thought it some jealous freak of the brain, and looked again to see it disappear.

But it was there still.

Then he heard a hoarse, hissing voice say: "If you will not be mine in life, you shall be in death?"

The next moment he heard a smothered scream from Belle, as if she had tried to call his name, and a strong hand on her lips had prevented her.

That moved him like an electric shock.

He let go of the wheel and sprang through the broken window of the pilot-house like a catapult, leaving the monster steamer without a guiding hand, and rushed toward the young lady.

As he neared her, he saw in the gloom of the night, that she was struggling with some one and being borne toward the edge of the hurricane deck.

"Unhand her, wretch—coward!" he exclaimed, dealing a man a terrific blow with his clenched fist.

The blow staggered the man.

"Rob, save me!" cried Belle, extending her hands toward him.

Rob sprang forward and clutched the man's throat.

She began to shriek at the top of her lungs the moment she felt herself free, and the struggle went on between the pilot and the desperate villain.

Her shrieks alarmed the clerk and others in the grand saloon below, and a rush was made for the hurricane deck.

Just as half a dozen people came rushing up the narrow stairway, the young pilot's assailant gathered him in his arms, and with a hoarse, maniacal laugh, rushed to the edge and plunged overboard with him.

Belle Swayne saw them go over, and giving a terrific scream, sank down on the deck in a death-swoon.

"What in the world is the matter?" the clerk asked, bending over the unconscious form of Belle, and discovering that she fainted.

"Rob must know something about this!" he said. "I left her in the pilot-house with him an hour ago. Rob—Rob!"

No reply came from the pilot-house.

He ran forward and looked in.

"My God!" he exclaimed; "Rob is not here! The boat is without a pilot!"

"Call Duncan!" he yelled, at the top of his voice. "Call Duncan quick, or we'll be wrecked! The pilot is overboard! Stop the boat—stop the boat!"

The day pilot was called up and told to hasten up to the pilot-house. He sprang out of his berth, and didn't stop to put on his clothes, but ran out and hastened up to the hurricane deck.

There he found the pilot-house empty, and the steamer making headway toward the bank.

Seizing the wheel, he threw all his strength into turning the boat back into the stream.

Round and round went the wheel, and the huge boat slowly turned back toward the middle of the stream.

CHAPTER XI.

BUT where was the brave young pilot during the time old Duncan was filling his post for him?

As he went over the top of the boat, he realized that all the chances of escape were against him. His assailant held him in a death-like grip, and he knew that in the water he would have but little chance in a struggle against him.

They struck the water in front of the wheel.

The wheel-box came down to within a foot of the water. A piece of planking had been torn off by some accident. As he threw up his hand, when they came to the surface, Rob caught hold of the edge of the lower side of the rent in the wheel-box.

The desperate villain still held on to him like grim death.

With his other hand Rob tried to throw him off, but in vain.

In his desperation, Rob drew a knife from his pocket, opened it with his teeth, and cut blindly, madly at him. Each thrust struck the wretch in the face; but not until one cheek had been split open and an eye destroyed did he release his hold.

Then, with a howl of baffled rage and hate, he sank down out of sight, and the great wheel on that side of the boat passed over him.

Though he had shaken off his desperate enemy, the young pilot was far from being out of danger. True, he could cling to the wheel-box with both hands, and thus keep his head above water, yet at any moment he was liable to be dragged under by contact with a log or fallen tree, as the boat rushed along.

Then again, the roar of the paddles, as they beat the water, utterly drowned his cries for help.

A dozen times did he cry for help, but he knew that no one could hear him. His case grew desperate indeed.

To let go would be certain death.

To hang there and not let those on board know that he was not at his post, was to leave the boat to rush headlong to destruction.

Just as he was summoning all his strength for a supreme effort to escape the wheel, he heard the whistle blow. Then he knew some one had taken charge of the pilot's wheel, and signaled to the engineer.

The great wheel ceased to revolve, and he heard voices all over the boat.

"Help, here!" he called out at the top of his voice, and he was amazed at the weakness that had come upon him. His voice was almost as weak as a child's.

"Hello!" cried Dan Duncan, leaning over the top of the wheel-box and looking down at the dark waters on that side of the boat. "Is that you, Rob?"

"Yes. Lower a boat, quick!" replied Rob.

The old man was electrified.

But the boat was lowered by and by, and was quickly rowed round by the wheel, where our hero was found hanging by the slender hold he had secured on the lower edge of the rent in the wheel-box.

He was soon lifted on board, and the first thing he said was:

"The young lady—where is she?"

"In her room, in a dead faint," said the clerk. "She couldn't tell us anything about it."

"How did it happen?" a dozen men asked at once.

Rob remained silent.

But the passengers seemed so eager to get at the news that he said:

"A lady passenger came up with the clerk to see me on a matter of business with which I was familiar. She remained seated in the pilot-house for nearly an hour, and then started to leave. Just as she passed out of the pilot-house a man sprang up and seized her, and tried to jump overboard with her. She called for help, and as there was no help near enough to be of service to her but myself, I let go of the wheel and sprang through the window and closed with the wretch. He was a powerful man—much stronger than me. After a brief struggle, during which I got him by the throat, he picked me up bodily and jumped overboard with me. As we came up to the surface I threw up my hand, and fortunately caught in a rent in the wheel-box where a piece of plank had been torn off by some accident. The villain still held on to me. I drew my knife with my left hand, opened it with my teeth, and cut at his face till I made him release his hold. He went under the wheel with a howl, and that was the last I heard of him."

McCall was standing near the daring young pilot. He gazed upon him in unfeigned admiration. His face, too, was beaming, for he knew in his soul that the man who had gone down at last was none other than George Addison, alias George Maddox, his rival.

"You are a hero!" he exclaimed, grasping Rob's hand and shaking it warmly. "You have twice saved Miss Swayne's life."

"I hope she is not hurt," said Rob, returning the cordial greeting of the passenger. "I am sorry I had to desert my post, but I couldn't stand there and see her murdered right under my very nose, and not do anything to save her."

Rob was in no hurry to return to his post. He was greatly exhausted by the terrible strain he had been subjected to, and felt the need of an hour's rest. With old Dan Duncan at the wheel he knew everything was safe, and so did not hesitate to seek the rest he so much needed.

A heavy black cloud came up from the

southward and obscured the stars. The darkness became intense, and low, muttering thunder was heard, accompanied by occasional flashes of lightning.

"Another storm's a-brewing," muttered the old pilot, "and if there's much wind in it we'll have to tie to the banks."

An hour passed, and the rain came down in a torrent. The thunder was long, loud and rolling. Everybody was inside talking over the incidents of the night, and the great wheels were sending the huge boat rushing through the water at a rapid rate.

Old Dan Duncan was peering out into the darkness ahead of him, trying to keep in the channel of the stream, when a dark form glided up in front of him and stopped there.

Old Dan reached down under the little box for the dark-lantern, which was kept there every night. The next moment he flashed the light in the man's face.

What he saw made his blood run cold in his veins, and his teeth chattered as if an ague convulsed him. His knees smote together, and the lantern dropped from his hand to the floor.

It was the old Spaniard.

While the old pilot's hair rose on end with terror he did not let go of the wheel.

Suddenly his voice came to him, and he yelled with all his might:

"Ahoy, there! Send Rob Rudder here!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE old pilot's cry aroused every one on board the steamer. The boat hands had heard his voice for years, and knew every note of it. But it was louder now and had a wildness about it that filled them with alarm.

"Rob! Rob! Rob!" called the clerk and two others, rushing toward the young pilot's room. "Duncan calls you! Duncan calls you!"

He sprang up and hastened to ascend to the pilot-house.

"What's the matter, Dan?" he asked, the moment he reached the old pilot's side.

"The old Spaniard!" hoarsely answered the old pilot. "There he is—there—look there!" and he held to the wheel with one hand, and with the other pointed to the shadowy form that had so much alarmed him.

Rob stooped and picked up the lantern from the floor.

With it he advanced on the figure and flashed the light full on its face.

An exclamation of horror burst from his lips, for he had gazed into the face of Maddox, the man with whom he had had a death-struggle but an hour before.

The face was ghastly in appearance, with terrible gashes cut in it, from which the blood was streaming down over his garments.

"Ah!" exclaimed Duncan, as he saw him start and stagger backwards, "you have seen the old Spaniard. You know what it is now."

"No," said Rob. "It was not the Spaniard."

"Who was it, then?"

"Maddox—the man who jumped overboard with me to-night," answered Rob. "I cut his face four or five times, and the gashes are there."

Rob looked at Duncan and saw, by the aid of the dark-lantern, that the old pilot was considerably worked up. He was pale, and evidently very uneasy in his mind.

Then he flashed his lantern around the deck again to see if his ghastly visitor was still about.

Nothing more was seen of the apparition, and he turned to Duncan and remarked:

"It seems like a dream to me."

Rob took the wheel once more, and the old pilot hurried down to the lower regions, as if eager to get away from the society of ghosts.

The young pilot was game as the gamest. He had recognized the face of the passenger, Maddox, and recognized the wounds he had inflicted with his knife. He now had no doubt as to who his assailant was, or his fate.

But he was in doubt as to what he should do if the ghost of the villain appeared to him again, especially if he were alone in the pilot-house. He made up his mind, however, to remain firm at his post, even though a thousand ghosts should appear.

In the meantime, the surgeon of the boat, aided by the stewardess and a lady passenger,

had been busy trying to restore Belle Swayne to consciousness.

She several times gave signs of returning consciousness, and would open her eyes and groan. Then she would give a cry of alarm and go off into another swoon, from which it required long and patient labor to recall her.

At last, about midnight, she opened her eyes and glared up at the surgeon.

Then she gave a sudden scream and sprang up.

The stewardess held her so as to prevent her from rising to her feet.

"Save him! Save him!" she screamed, at the top of her voice. "He is overboard! The young pilot is overboard!"

"He has been found," said the surgeon, "and is up in the pilot-house."

She gave him a look of incredulity.

"You have been over three hours unconscious, Miss Swayne," said the surgeon.

"Ah! And is he really safe?"

"Yes, and at his post again."

"Thank God!" and she lay back on the bed and burst into tears.

She wept long and hysterically, and could not stop, though she tried ever so much to do so.

Word was sent up to Rob that she had recovered consciousness and was all right.

The passengers all returned to their rooms, now that the excitement was over, for they had not heard that the ghost of the old Spaniard had been up at the pilot-house.

Had they been told that they would have said the boat was haunted, and nothing could have induced them to go to sleep.

"It won't do to let 'em know it," said Rob to himself, as he stood at the wheel. "It would ruin the reputation and business of the boat."

The storm continued for more than an hour after old Duncan went down-stairs. The thunder rolled heavily, and at times vivid flashes of lightning lit up the scene brighter than the noonday sun.

It was during one of these vivid flashes that Rob was almost paralyzed at seeing the ghostly apparition of Maddox standing in front of the pilot-house. The pallid face, with its gaping wound and the blood-stained garments, was as natural as life.

At the next flash Rob saw him searching his clothes for something he seemed to have lost. At each flash he was searching a different pocket. Then he went to searching along the deck until he reached the spot where the death struggle had taken place. To save his life Rob could not keep his eyes off the ghastly form.

Suddenly he saw him stoop and pick up something lying at his feet. Rob's eye caught it. He recognized it as a photograph. That it was the picture of Belle Swayne he did not for a moment doubt.

As if moved by an irresistible impulse, he sprang through the window of the pilot-house and made a grab for the picture.

Just at that moment another flash of lightning came, and with it a wild shriek rent the air, and a heavy roll of thunder seemed to shake the huge steamer from stem to stern. At the same time the young pilot felt a shock that seemed to disjoint every bone in his body, and he sank down on his face in utter unconsciousness, leaving the boat again at the mercy of the current.

CHAPTER XIII.

How long he lay there on the deck the young pilot never knew. Just as consciousness was returning, and he was in a half-dreamy state, feeling but little pain, he heard a whistle blowing fiercely, giving a signal of imminent danger.

He sprang to his feet and reeled up to the pilot-house, opened the door, and seized the wheel.

Just in front was a large steamboat, making frantic efforts to get out of the way of the Osceola.

In a moment Rob saw that a collision was almost inevitable. The other boat woke up all the echoes of the river for miles around with her whistle, and every man of her crew was on deck, yelling and shouting at the top of his voice.

The hullabaloo woke up every passenger on board the Osceola.

Rob pulled at the wheel with all his might, hoping against hope that he would be able to avoid a collision. He answered the signals as rapidly as he could, and then kept pulling on his wheel.

In the midst of the general excitement Rob imagined he heard the voice of old Captain McClure, who lay dead down-stairs, alongside of Judge Swayne, calling to him:

"Steady, lad—steady, lad!"

He pulled steadily, and prayed for two minutes' time. By that time he felt sure of being able to skim by and avoid a collision.

A flash of lightning came, and he thought sure he saw the bluff old captain in front of the pilot-house, signaling him with his arms and keeping perfectly cool.

The two boats grazed each other, and as they went by everybody on the up-bound boat swore at the young pilot of the Osceola.

In a minute or two the danger was past, and the two boats went on their way all right, though their passengers had received a terrible fright.

"What in the world was the matter?" the clerk asked, rushing up to the hurricane deck. "You came very near running down that boat!"

"Is anybody hurt down-stairs?" Rob asked.

"No."

"Then nothing is the matter. Tell the passengers to go to bed and rest assured that no danger threatens."

The clerk saw that Rob was not in a good humor, and so he went back down-stairs and reported that everything was all right.

"I never saw such luck in all my life," said Rob, as he looked ahead. "If I had stayed out there just two minutes longer, the two boats would have run together and become total wrecks. Something struck me out there. That's what kept me so long. I feel as if I had been beaten all over my body, and then thrown into the fire."

As the night advanced Rob became weaker and quite sick. He dared not leave his post, however, and yet he felt that he ought to be relieved.

When old Duncan came up at sunrise to relieve him, he was amazed at the haggard look of suffering on his face.

"My God, Rob!" he exclaimed, "what's the matter with you?"

"I am almost dead, Dan," he replied, relinquishing his hold of the wheel and dropping down on the floor in sheer exhaustion.

"Why, what has happened, man?" cried the old pilot, stooping and picking him up in his arms. "Why, your clothes are almost burnt off your back! Have you been in a row with the old Spaniard?"

"Call the clerk," said Rob, in very feeble tones. "I am too weak to go down by myself."

Duncan called down through the speaking-tube for the clerk to be sent up. In a couple of minutes the clerk made his appearance and asked what was wanted.

"Help Rob down to his berth," said the old pilot, as he pulled away at the wheel. "He is very sick."

The clerk assisted him down and then went for the surgeon, who lost no time in responding to the call.

"Why, Rob!" exclaimed the surgeon, as he examined the youth and his hurts, "you've been scorched by the lightning as sure as I live."

"Eh!" and the young pilot opened his eyes in amazement.

"You've been struck by lightning—or rather grazed by it. See here, your clothes are nearly burnt to cinders, and your flesh on your back has been badly burned."

"Well, I thought I was burnt, but didn't know what the matter was."

"The deuce!" the doctor exclaimed. "Do you mean to say you were struck by lightning and did not know it?"

"I knew I was struck by something," said Rob, "but was knocked out so quick that I didn't know what it was."

"Why didn't you call for help?"

"I didn't know anything after I was struck till I heard a whistle just in front of me last night. Then I got up and saw another steamer right in front of me. I pulled with all my might, and just did avoid a collision."

"Great heavens!" ejaculated the doctor, "what a narrow escape! I understand it all now, though I could not last night. It was a narrow escape for you, too, my boy."

"Yes. I suffered great pain all through the night."

"I should think you did. Why, you are blistered all along your back."

"Yes, there's where it hurts most. Just let me see that coat."

The torn and scorched coat was handed him. He looked at it with no little interest, and then handed it back to the surgeon, saying:

"Keep it for me, doctor. I want to look at it again some day."

The surgeon searched the pockets before hanging it up. In one of them he found a photograph of a beautiful girl, the face of which he did not stop to examine.

"Do you want this, Rob?" he asked, holding it up for our hero to see.

Rob glared at it in astonishment.

"Let me see it, doctor," he said.

The photograph was handed him.

He looked at it in silence, and turned pale as a corpse. He recognized in the picture the beautiful features of Belle Swayne, and it was the same picture he had sprung through the window of the pilot-house to wrest from the ghost of Maddox. There was no mistaking it. The vivid flash of lightning, at the moment he placed his hand on it, revealed to him every lineament of the fair face.

"Yes," he said, placing the picture under his pillow, "I'll keep this. I didn't know it was in my pocket."

Belle Swayne was too ill the next morning to leave her room, but she heard of the terrible sufferings Rob had endured, and sent word to him that she felt deeply for him.

The old stewardess told her that the boat would reach New Orleans that afternoon, and therefore he would not have to go on duty again for three or four days.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN the Osceola arrived at her wharf in the Crescent City, there was a large concourse of people there to receive the remains of Judge Swayne and Captain McClure. Both men were well known and very popular in the city, and their friends had made elaborate preparations for the funeral.

Just before she left the boat Belle Swayne asked permission to see the young pilot. The young clerk escorted her to his room, where she caught his hand in hers and burst into tears.

She leaned over and whispered in his ear:

"As one of them is out of the way, you will not have that disagreeable task to do, but I thank you ever so much, all the same. I shall never forget your kindness."

She pressed his hand in hers, and then turned and went ashore, where she was placed in a carriage, and driven away with the funeral procession.

The moment she was seated in the carriage which had been assigned to her, Alex Grosvenor—alias McCall—entered another, saying to the driver:

"Keep that carriage in sight; follow wherever it goes, and you shall be well paid."

The coachman obeyed his instructions to the letter. He followed the procession to the church, keeping Belle's carriage in full view all the way.

In the meantime, McCall threw away his disguise and appeared as Alex Grosvenor. He was a good looking man, his face showing indomitable pluck and perseverance.

When the procession halted in front of the church, Grosvenor sprang out of the carriage and hastened forward to assist Belle to alight.

"You will believe me, Miss Belle," he said to her, in low tones, "when I say that I deeply sympathize with you in your sorrow."

"Thanks, Mr. Grosvenor," she said; "you are very kind."

He extended his hand to assist her out of the carriage.

She did not appear to take any notice of the act, and turning to a gentleman who was standing near—one of her distant relatives—beckoned him to approach.

He came forward promptly.

"Please assist me," she whispered to him.

He took her hand and assisted her to alight. Then he extended his arm, which she took, and escorted her inside the church.

Grosvenor remained at the church till the funeral services there were ended. Then he re-entered the carriage and followed the remains to the cemetery. But he was careful not to approach her again that day, as he feared to further anger her by so doing.

When the procession gradually dispersed and left the cemetery, Grosvenor again ordered his driver to follow the carriage in which Belle had taken refuge. He wanted to

ascertain where she would stop in the city, so as not to lose sight of her while there.

For nearly two miles he followed her carriage, and at last saw her alight and enter a large, fine old mansion occupied by Dr. Lebrun, accompanied by a lady and gentleman.

Grosvenor took down the name of the street and the number of the house in a small memorandum book which he carried in his pocket, and then ordered the driver to return to the St. Charles Hotel. There he alighted, paid the coachman a liberal fee, and then entered the hotel and registered as "Alex Grosvenor, of Tennessee." His baggage was then ordered up from the steamer, and he became a regular boarder at the hotel.

The death of Captain McClure had the effect of interfering somewhat with the business of the Osceola. The old captain had some property in the city, and his legal adviser lived there.

The day after the funeral of the captain the lawyer came on board and asked to see Rob Rudder.

The clerk conducted the lawyer to Rob's berth, and then retired.

"So you are laid up, are you?" the lawyer said, as he took a seat by the young pilot's bedside.

"Yes, sir, for a few days, at least."

"What's the matter?"

"I was struck by lightning night before last."

The old lawyer eyed him suspiciously for a moment or two and then asked:

"Do you want me to believe that?"

The boat's surgeon came in at that moment.

"Say, doctor," said Rob, "Mr. Cranston here thinks I was struck by a mule."

"Well, he is mistaken. You were struck by lightning, and the clothes were burned off your back by the electricity."

The old lawyer was amazed.

He had never heard of such a narrow escape in all his life.

"He can't work as pilot for a week at least," said the doctor.

"I don't suppose he will want to be a pilot after he gets up," remarked the lawyer.

"Why not?" the doctor asked.

"Because he can have a better berth if he wishes to."

"I don't want any better berth than pilot of the Osceola," replied Rob.

"Well, we'll see. A captain's berth is a much pleasanter one, is it not?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Well, you'll be Captain Rob, then, I guess, as the Osceola is yours, as well as all the other property of Captain McClure."

Rob fairly gasped for breath, and the doctor stared in open-eyed wonder.

"I drew up the will myself," continued the old lawyer, "and have come to you for instructions as to what you want done in regard to the estate."

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN the old lawyer told him he was the owner of the magnificent steamer, the young pilot could scarcely realize the truth of it. But for the fact that he well knew the stern character of the old lawyer he could not have made up his mind to believe in his good fortune.

It all seemed like a dream to him now, and not until the doctor took him by the hand and congratulated him on his good fortune did he realize that he was a rich man and owner of the finest steamer on the river.

A search among the captain's papers revealed a large deposit of cash in one of the city banks. The lawyer took proper steps to have the amount placed to Rob's credit on the books of the bank.

"You will have to forego one trip," said the doctor to the young pilot, "as you will not be able to do any duty for a week at least."

"The boat will have to wait also," said Rob, "for I can't get old Dan to serve at night and I don't know a good night pilot on the river."

"That would be the best thing to do, anyway," said the doctor.

The black signals of mourning which had been put out all over the boat were increased in number, and orders given that no freight be received for that week.

The old lawyer then took leave of the young pilot, and went to look after the estate that had so suddenly changed owners.

Scarcely had the lawyer left the boat, when a servant came on board, bearing a basket of flowers and fruit.

"Dis heah is fer de pilot," said the ducky, giving the basket and a perfumed note to the stewardess.

The stewardess delivered them to Rob. They came from Belle Swayne, who wrote in the note:

"In my deep grief I sympathize with my preserver, and regret that he is not able to be out. God grant that you may not suffer much pain, and that you may soon be well again. Please accept this fruit. I thought you would relish them."

"Ever your friend, BELLE SWAYNE."

Rob kissed the note and slipped it under his pillow, to keep company with the photograph he had picked up on the hurricane deck, on the night he was struck by the lightning.

The doctor ate some of the luscious fruit, and rallied Rob on his having made an impression on the fair Belle.

"Ah!" he said, "here comes another passenger—Mr. McCall," and the doctor shook hands with Grosvenor as he came into the room to inquire how the young pilot was.

"How are you to-day, Mr. Rudder?" McCall asked.

"I am very sore," was the reply.

"Quite natural. You might have been very dead. You are the luckiest man I ever heard of in all my life."

"Oh, you haven't heard all of his good luck yet," said the doctor.

"What other good luck has happened to him?"

"Why, Captain McClure has left a will giving him this boat and all his property up and down the river."

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed the visitor, "that is a windfall indeed."

"Yes—the young pilot is now the owner and can be captain if he likes. But that is not all his good luck. Just look at that basket of fruit and flowers there. It was sent by a young lady passenger who came down with us yesterday. Oh, he is a good catch now, and will get such delicate attentions from the ladies quite often."

Rob gave the loquacious doctor a look that was intended to stop him, but that good-natured individual did not catch his meaning, and so he went on talking in a lively, pleasant vein.

"You forgot, doctor," said Rob, "that the young lady's situation is very similar to my own—we are both alone in the world now."

"Yes," replied the doctor, "and a fellow feeling makes her wondrous kind to you. She may have fallen heir to a handsome fortune as well as yourself."

"Judge Swayne was considered a wealthy man," remarked McCall, very quietly. "I knew him well. Belle was his only child living, and she falls heir to his estate of course."

"I am glad to hear that," said Rob, "for it would be a terrible thing for her to be kept penniless in this world. She would have a hard time of it."

"She has some very rich relatives in this city and in Tennessee," McCall remarked.

"That would not better her condition much, as she is too proud-spirited ever to enjoy life while living on the charity of relatives."

McCall watched him closely as he spoke, and his brow grew black, and his eyes gleamed with a steely luridness.

A few minutes later he took his departure and Rob was left alone with his flowers and basket of fruit.

As he wended his way up the street, Alex Grosvenor lashed himself into a terrible passion.

He went to the hotel and retired to his room, there to ponder on the new obstacle that had come up in his pathway to vex him. That he was willing to steep his soul in crime in hopes of winning the beautiful woman he loved, the reader already knows. He was even now contemplating a diabolical crime against his new rival.

The next day, as he was walking down Canal street, near the river, he met old Dan Duncan, the day pilot of the Osceola.

The recognition was mutual, and they shook hands.

"How's young Rudder this morning?" he asked of the old pilot.

"Doing well," was the reply. "The boy had a close rub."

"Yes—the narrowest escape I ever heard

of. He has had good luck, though, for all that."

"Yes—always was lucky. He deserves it—best pilot on the river—a born pilot."

"So I hear. It was never known who his parents were, was it?"

"No. The captain could never find out. He was a father to him, though, and the boy is better off, maybe, than if his parents had been found."

"Guess you were right. How old was he when he was found?"

"A little over three, I believe. Maybe not so old."

"How old is he now?"

"About twenty, I believe."

"It was about seventeen years ago, then, that he was found?"

"Yes, about that time."

"Come in here and have a drink," and the genial passenger led the way into a saloon, followed by the old pilot, unconscious that he was playing into the hands of a consummate villain.

They pledged each other in brimming glasses, and they parted.

Grosvenor had gained the information he wanted, and he at once set to work to use it.

Immediately after leaving Dan Duncan, Grosvenor paid a visit to several low saloons down by the river. In one of them he got the name and address of a very disreputable old hag, to whom he prepared to pay a visit.

Going to a costumer, he procured a disguise, and under the shadows of night went to the den of old "Madam Carew," one of the worst creatures in the Crescent City, and the wife of a burglar.

He remained there for over an hour, and when he left her den she held a purse of gold in her crime-stained hands, and a paper full of written instructions.

Two days later young Rob Rudder was lying in bed, propped up by pillows, when word was brought in that a strange woman wished to see him.

"Well, send her in," said the doctor, who, with old Dan Duncan, was spending the day with the young pilot.

The woman was shown into the room.

Old Dan Duncan knew her by sight, having once seen her arrested in a drunken brawl, and was given her name and a bit of her history by a by-stander.

The old wretch looked hard at the young pilot, and asked:

"Are you the young pilot they call Rob Rudder?"

"Yes; that's my name," said Rob.

She gazed at him in silence for a minute or two, and Rob returned her gaze with interest, wondering what she was after.

"Were you picked up in the river about seventeen years ago?" she asked.

"Yes."

"With a white dress on and a blue hood?"

"Yes—why do you ask?"

"Was there a small gold locket hanging to a small chain around your neck?"

"Yes—why do you ask—speak, in goodness' name!"

"My son—my son! You are my child!" and the woman sprang forward to clasp him in her arms.

CHAPTER XVI.

HAD the steamer been suddenly scuttled and begun going down, our young hero could not have been more surprised than he was when he heard the repulsive old hag claim him as her son. Some undefined impression told him that it was not true. His heart sickened at the bare idea of the relationship, and his soul revolted.

"Stop!" he exclaimed, repulsing her with both hands as he lay there propped up by the pillows. "You are not my mother!"

"Oh, my God!" moaned the woman, sinking down on a chair by the bedside; "my own child disowns me! I am punished enough—it is more than I can bear!"

"Look here, Madam Carew," said old Dan Duncan, rising to his feet and facing her with an indignant flush on his bronzed face—"I know you for an old reprobate. You can no more be the mother of Rob than you can be the Queen of England."

"Who are you, sir?" she demanded. "Can't a bad woman be a mother as well as a good one? I am his mother, and a bad one at that. I have been a very wicked woman, or I would not have been so long without my child. But now that I have found my son,

for his sake I will retire to a secluded life and live for his sake alone."

"No, no, no!" groaned Rob, in a husky tone of voice; "you are not—cannot be my mother! My heart and soul revolt at the idea! You cannot be my mother!"

"But I am your mother, for all that," she said. "I have already given you proof of it."

"No, no! You have only told what everybody knew before. You have given no proof at all."

"Oh, I can give other proof. Your name was Andrew, and—"

"No, no! I never had any such name."

"You were too young to recollect, my child. You were not three years old, and—"

"Madam Carew," said old Dan, the day pilot, "I know you for an impostor, and if you don't leave this boat instantly I'll throw you overboard, woman though you be!"

Rob was as pale as death and weak as a kitten. He began to be afraid that the repulsive old virago would prove to be his parent, and the idea made him sick.

The doctor saw the look of distress on his face, and said to the woman:

"You have made a claim that is repudiated by Mr. Rudder. You cannot force yourself on him or his friends without his consent. But if your claim is true, and you are really his mother, you can easily account for certain marks and two scars on his body when found."

"Yes, of course I can," she said. "But who are you, sir, and what have you to do with me or him?"

"I am the physician of this boat," replied the doctor, "and was with Captain McClure when Rob was taken half dead out of the river. I have been with him ever since, and know all about him. There were two large scars on him when found. Where are they, and what caused them?"

"They were caused by burns."

"Probably, but where were they?"

"It has been so long ago that I don't exactly remember, but I think they were on his arms."

"You recollect them, do you—that they were caused by burns?"

"Oh, yes."

"That settles your claim. He never had a scar on him. You are a vile impostor, and had better make yourself scarce."

"You lie, sir! The scars were there. If they are not there now, it's because either time or your medical skill has removed them."

"Duncan, will you please put her out?" said Rob, turning appealingly to the old pilot.

"Here, you old Jezebel," said Dan Duncan, "march out of here, or overboard you go," and he laid a heavy hand on her shoulder.

She wheeled around, and glaring at him, hissed, serpent-like:

"Touch me again, and I'll kill you!"

"Tut, tut, you old she-shark! Get out of here!" and he attempted to push her toward the door.

Instantly she drew a dagger from the bosom of her dress and made a vicious thrust at him.

He barely had time to spring back out of her reach. The point of the weapon cut his coat.

She followed him up.

"Back, you old hag!" exclaimed the old pilot, "or I'll knock you cold!"

She sprang upon him with a screech, and aimed a desperate blow at him with the dagger. To save himself, he gave her a blow between the eyes with his fist and sent her all in a heap at the further end of the room.

When she recovered from the blow she glared round the room in a dazed sort of way.

"Have you got enough of it, you old Jezebel?" Duncan asked.

She looked up at him, and then recollected what had happened. Knowing that she was known to the old pilot, and that he might do her more bodily harm, she rose to her feet and reeled toward the door.

Duncan held it open for her as she passed out.

"I'll fix you for that blow!" she hissed, as she passed him.

"I am fixed already," he remarked, in reply to her threat.

As soon as she was on the shore she turned and began a foul tirade of abuse.

"You ungrateful wretch!" she cried. "You have turned your back on your own natural mother, Robert Rudder! Because I am old and poor and ugly you disown me, Rob, but

the world shall know of it. Everybody shall know of the heartless way you treat your poor old mother."

Having delivered herself of her tirade of abuse, she turned and made her way back toward her den, ere the crowd she had gathered about her could attract a policeman to the spot.

But nearly every one working along the wharves knew the young pilot. His many daring acts had long been a theme among them, and they knew how he had been found in the river and named Rob Rudder. It was not to be wondered at, then, that when the old woman claimed him as her son they were amazed beyond expression.

In an hour or two several newspaper reporters were on hand making inquiries about it. Those who saw old Dan and the doctor got their news straight. Those who did not printed long details of how the youthful pilot had treated his old mother.

The next morning the papers all had notices of the affair, and as he perused them, Alex Grosvenor chuckled with delight.

"Ah! The old dame played her game well," he said to himself. "Of course Belle Swayne will be sure to see this, as some of them make mention of the fact that he saved her life on the trip down the river from Memphis. If I was sure she would not suspect me, I would mark one of these papers and send it to her. I may rest easy over her seeing it, however. Somebody will be sure to call her attention to it."

CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN the old woman left the boat, Rob was in a fever of excitement over her visit. The doctor had to give him an opiate to quiet him and put him to sleep. So powerful was the dose that he did not wake up till the next morning.

The doctor was by his bedside when he opened his eyes.

"How did you sleep?" the doctor asked.

"Why, I must have slept all night long."

"Yes—I never saw you sleep better in my life. The medicine had a good effect. You feel better, do you not?"

"Yes; much better. What became of that old woman?"

"Oh, she went away growling and making all the fuss she could. She is a rank fraud, and if she comes here again I'll make some of the boat hands duck her seven times in the river."

"No, have her arrested. I now know that she is an impostor, as she said I had scars on me from burns, when I have none."

"Yes, that was a trap I laid for her, and she tumbled right into it."

"Doctor, do you know I think some one hired her to pay me that visit and act as she did."

"Eh—you do?"

"Yes; she got the points from some one, and was put up to the job. It may be a joke but it's one I cannot appreciate."

"No, I should say not. Whom do you suspect?"

"I hardly know."

"Well, don't let it bother you, and in a few days you will be able to be out attending to business."

The doctor then left him, after giving the stewardess orders not to let him be disturbed. Being thus alone with his thoughts, Rob lay there a long time thinking. The fair face of Belle Swayne flitted before his mind's eye continuously. He reached under his pillow and drew forth the photograph of the maiden, and gazed long and wistfully upon it.

He was still wide awake when the old day pilot returned and brought him some medicine the doctor had ordered.

"Lad," said the bluff old fellow, "not one of the boat hands believes the old hag's story."

Several days passed, and Rob was able to leave the boat, though still quite sore.

In company with the doctor, he paid a visit to a friend who was stopping at the St. Charles Hotel, and there met Alex Grosvenor.

"Ah!" said Grosvenor, extending his hand, "I am glad to see you out again. Hope you feel much better than when I saw you last."

"Thanks. I am much better," replied Rob, "and hope you are also."

"Never felt better in my life. When do you go up the river again?"

"Not till next week. The Osceola is laid up for the space of one round trip."

"He has some little business to attend to before taking the helm again," remarked the doctor.

"Yes. I have got to punish an old hag for daring to claim to be my mother."

"Oh, yes, I saw it in the papers. It was a very unpleasant affair. But nobody believes her story."

"No, of course not; but there's somebody behind her I want to get at. She can only save herself by giving the name of the party who put up the job."

"That's right. Make her tell or give her the full penalty of the law," said he. "It was a most outrageous affair."

He then invited Rob and the doctor to have lunch with him, but they declined, and soon after left him.

No sooner was he alone than he hastened up to his room and donned his disguise.

"I must hasten to see old Madam Carew," he muttered, "and warn her of her danger. They may give her such a scare as to cause her to weaken. If they do, suspicion might revert to me, notwithstanding this disguise."

His disguise complete, Alex Grosvenor left the hotel and made his way to the old harri-dan's den. He found her at home. She received him with a leering chuckle.

"Didn't I do it just right?" she asked, the moment he entered.

"Yes, but how did you get that black eye?"

"A man on the boat did it. He knocked me down when I wouldn't leave as soon as they wanted me to. It will cost \$100."

"How?" in some surprise.

"It was gained in your service, and I guess you will pay for it. I want \$100 for that black eye, or I'll make it cost you a great deal more!"

Grosvenor was taken all aback at the situation, and for a few moments did not know what to say or do. But the old vixen did not leave him long in suspense as to what she would do if the money was not forthcoming. He paid it, and then said:

"Rob Rudder is going to have you arrested, and that's what I came here to tell you. You had better leave the city for a few weeks, until the matter blows over."

"I won't do it," she said. "You must stand by me if I am arrested, or else pay me big money."

"I will pay your expenses to any other place, and keep you there on one hundred dollars per month."

"Not much, I won't. One hundred dollars won't keep me in whisky."

"How much do you want?"

"Ten thousand dollars, cash down."

He was knocked all out of time by her answer, and glared at her like a wolf at bay.

"I am not worth ten thousand dollars," he finally said, 'as soon as he could recover his speech.

"I know better than that, Alex Grosvenor," she replied. "You are worth fifty times that sum."

He sprang to his feet, his face livid with rage.

"How did you find out my name, woman? By all the powers of darkness, you have played me false, and you shall die for it!" and with that he drew a dagger and plunged it to the hilt in her bosom.

The old hag gave a terrific scream, and clutched his coat collar, yelling:

"Murder, murder!" at the top of her voice.

"Die, die, you old hag!" he hissed, stabbing her repeatedly in his efforts to release himself as well as stifle her accusing voice.

But she seemed to have more life than a Kilkenny cat, for she held on with both hands and kept up her screaming.

Suddenly the old she-fiend released her hold and retreated to the further end of the room, bleeding from a score of stabs. There she turned, and, pointing a finger at him, cried out:

"You have killed me, but I will haunt you to your death!"

The next moment she sank down to the floor—dead.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALEX GROSVENOR stood like one in a dream for a moment or two, gazing down at his victim, who lay all in a heap on the floor.

"That settles her," he muttered, "and I am safe. Ah! I hear some one coming. Her voice attracted somebody's attention."

He turned and ran into a little back room. There was a window looking out over a small back-yard. He sprang through that and ran into the rear of a candy shop. Making a dash through that he escaped to the street and made his way back to the hotel.

Taking off his disguise he put the clothes into a small valise, and waited till night to enable him to carry it down to the river.

With a heavy stone in it he sunk the valise in deep water, and then drew a long breath of relief.

"They can't bring anything to my door now," he muttered, as he wended his back to the hotel. "I never did a better thing in my life. I got rid of a terrible old leech, and at the same time turned the finger of suspicion against the young pilot."

The dead body of Madam Carew was found, covered with blood flowing from a score of stab wounds, only a minute or so after the murderer had fled. The cry of murder was raised, but in the excitement of the moment no one thought of pursuing the murderer. A vigorous pursuit would have resulted in his capture. As it was he escaped to his hotel and the case was lost, as against him.

The news spread like wildfire, and the police had to place a strong guard around the shanty to keep back the crowd that rushed to the spot, eager to gratify a morbid curiosity. Some one suggested that young Rob Rudder had instigated the murder in order to get rid of her as a mother. The rumor spread, and in less than an hour's time it was being reported all over the city that the young pilot was the murderer.

Old Dan Duncan was walking round on the wharf, when a man came up and asked if Rob Rudder was aboard.

"No," answered Dan; "he is out in the city somewhere."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Some three or four hours. Why do you ask?"

"Then he is a murderer, as sure as you live," said the man, looking old Dan full in the face.

Quick as a flash the old pilot planted a blow between his eyes with his brawny fist, and laid the man at full length on his back.

"I'll knock you down first," he said, "and let you explain afterwards. Now what do you mean, you lying whelp? Get up and explain yourself, or it's me that'll be the murderer."

The man scrambled to his feet, and gazed around in a dazed sort of way, and said:

"I'll arrest you for assault and battery. I'm a deputy sheriff."

"No deputy sheriff can slander Rob Rudder and not get knocked down, when I am around. The governor himself couldn't do it."

"Here's my shield—I arrest you."

"Hang you and your shield, too! If you don't explain what you mean by calling Rob a murderer, I'll pitch you and your shield into the river."

"He has murdered old Dame Carew."

"What!"

"He has murdered old Dame Carew, who claimed to be his mother," repeated the man. "He stabbed her over twenty times—"

"That's a lie twenty times over," blurted out the old pilot. "Rob could never do that."

"Well, that's what they say, anyhow."

"Who saw him?"

"I don't know."

"Did anybody see him?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think you know anything about it, and if you say again that he murdered a woman I'll chuck you into the river. Get away from here before I get riled."

The deputy made haste to get away from such a hard-fisted customer, and the crowd of wharf laborers, who were friends of the pilot, hooted at him as he went.

"May I run fast aground!" growled old Dan, "if this isn't a piece of ugly business; but Rob Rudder is not the boy to kill an old woman. I must go and hunt him up and see what it all means."

He went off up Canal street in hopes of meeting Rob, who he knew was with the steamer's doctor.

On the corner of St. Charles street he saw a crowd of excited people, and rushing up, found that some overzealous citizens were trying to arrest Rob.

The doctor was trying to protect him with his cane.

"It's a lie!" he heard the doctor exclaim, in

excited tones. "I've been with him since seven o'clock this morning, and he has not been in that part of the city."

"Abaft there!" roared old Dan, drawing a revolver and elbowing his way to Rob's side. "It's going to cost the lives of a dozen fools to arrest the lad. Stand back, or I'll give you a cargo of lead!"

Seeing a determined man with a cocked revolver in his hand, the crowd gave way, and in a minute or two they had scattered.

"If they think him guilty," said the doctor, "let 'em swear out a warrant and send an officer to arrest him."

"That's it," said old Dan. "Now come down to the boat, where we can defy the villains."

"You are wrong, Dan," he replied. "I am going to give myself up to the authorities and demand an investigation. That's the best way to vindicate myself."

"Yes. But them blamed loafers shan't pick you up if I am around."

A few hours later the sheriff came down to the boat and questioned Rob and the doctor. He became thoroughly satisfied that Rob was not the murderer, and so refused to arrest him.

"The dagger with which she was killed was found covered with blood on the floor of her room," he said, in speaking to the doctor, "and the one who did it must have gotten blood on his clothes."

"Yes, it would seem so."

"A lady to see you, sir," said the stewardess, coming suddenly into the captain's office, where they were seated, and a moment later Belle Swayne entered the room, pale and beautiful as a houri.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN the young lady entered the cabin, the sheriff and the others rose to their feet, and remained standing. Only Rob and the doctor knew who she was. Rob sprang forward and greeted her with a cordiality that brought a crimson flush to her cheeks.

"I am honored by this visit, Miss Swayne," said Rob, as he bowed with bared head before her, "and more glad to see you than I can say. Please be seated. You know the doctor, I believe?"

"You were so kind to me, doctor, that I can never forget you."

"Ah! that is more pleasant to me than the chinking of a bag full of gold," replied the gallant doctor, placing a chair for the fair visitor.

She took the proffered seat and looked around at the three men, as if at a loss what excuse to give for her extraordinary visit on board the Osceola. The sheriff was about to make an excuse for leaving, when she spoke to him.

"You are an officer, are you not?"

"I am the sheriff, miss," he said, making a profound bow to her.

"You came here to arrest Mr. Rudder, did you not?"

The direct question startled all three of the gentlemen. They stared at her and then threw quick glances at one another.

"I come here to see Mr. Rudder about the charges that had been made against him," said the sheriff. "But I have not arrested him, nor do I think I will have to do so."

"I am glad to hear that, sir. You will pardon me for what I am doing, I know, when I tell you that Mr. Rudder twice saved my life, and that in my gratitude to him I have come here to tell him that I believe him entirely innocent of any wrong-doing."

All three gentlemen bowed, and Rob, almost choked with emotions he could neither understand nor describe, stammered out:

"I—I—knew—you would not think me guilty of murder."

"I am also sure in my mind that I know who the person is that put her up to making that claim on you."

Rob sprang to her side, and the doctor and the sheriff came up closer, as if anxious to catch every word she uttered.

"Ah! Do you know that?" Rob asked, greatly excited.

"Yes; I am quite sure of that," she said; "but as I have no proof of it that would be accepted in court, I dare not call any names."

The sheriff glared at the doctor. The doctor stared at him, and Rob gazed at the pale, beautiful face of the young lady as if trying to read her thoughts. He was in a whirlwind of emotion, and didn't know what to say.

"Mr. Rudder," she finally said, "have you no reason to suspect any one who came down in the last trip of your boat of having a hand in this thing?"

"Miss Swayne," he said, "do you think that he could have bribed that old woman to do as she did?"

"I don't think him at all incapable of doing such a thing," she replied, "since he has done others equally as infamous."

"I am glad you have told me that much of your suspicions, Miss Swayne," Rob said, "for it may lead to the capture of the real murderer."

"Then I am glad I came," she said, rising to go, "since you do not say I did wrong. I do hope you may have no further trouble about it, Mr. Rudder."

"Thanks. I do not think I will. I will escort you to your carriage," and he tendered her his arm, which she accepted, and led her out of the room.

As they were going down the grand staircase to the lower deck, Belle asked:

"Will you come and see me, and let me know just what has been done about it?"

"Yes, and esteem it the greatest pleasure of my life to do so."

Her heart throbbed and bounded like a bird in a cage, and her eyes beamed with a joyful light, for she knew then that he loved her.

She pressed his arm with a gentle pressure of her hand, for she dared not trust to her voice in that public place. He, too, was almost frightened at what he had said, and was too nervous to say more. He led her ashore and placed her in her carriage.

"You will come and see me soon?" she said.

"Yes, as soon as possible," he replied, as he held her hand in his for a moment or two. "You don't know how glad I am that you called to-day."

"I hope I did not do wrong."

"You can do no wrong. You are an angel!"

And as if ashamed to look her in the face after such a speech as that, he hurriedly shut the carriage door and retreated toward the boat.

The carriage drove away, and Rob ran back up-stairs to see the doctor and the sheriff, and talk the matter over with them.

The sheriff wanted him to give the name of the man alluded to, but Rob declined, on account of the young lady.

"But I'll place a good detective on his track," he said, "and have him shadowed day and night till the mystery is solved. We have no legal proof that our suspicions are correct, but we are satisfied in our own minds that he is the guilty one."

"You have no clew but your suspicions, then?" said the sheriff.

"That's all. It may be that we may never have any other. Will you promise me to say nothing about it till such time as I may give you permission to do so?"

"Yes, if you wish it," they both answered.

"Thanks. I do wish it very much, as I have a plan by which I think I can work out the whole business."

"I wish you all the success in the world, I assure you," said the sheriff, "and shall be glad to render you all the assistance in my power."

The sheriff then took leave of the young pilot and went ashore, leaving him and the doctor alone together.

"Doctor," said Rob, as soon as he had seen the sheriff ashore, "that visit from Miss Swayne has given me a clew to this whole thing."

"Hasn't it given you a clew to nothing else, my dear young friend?" the doctor asked, giving him a very wise look out of the corners of his eyes.

"What do you mean, doctor?"

"The deuce! Don't you know?"

"No."

"Then you are much greener than I thought you were," remarked the doctor. "Can't you see that she is in love with the young man who saved her life?"

Rob caught his breath, and then turned pale and red by turns.

"Why, I know it is true, man! Go in and win her, Rob Rudder. She is worth her weight in gold."

"So she is," muttered Rob, more to himself than otherwise, as he sank down on a seat.

Then he fell into a deep train of thought, and apparently forgot that the doctor was standing by to hear what he had to say in

reference to the unknown party to whom Belle Swayne alluded in his presence.

"Rob," said the doctor, "do you know who the man is she alluded to as being the one at the bottom of all this trouble?"

"Yes—he is one of the two men I had some trouble with on the trip down."

"Ah! I begin to understand," said the doctor. "That man is jealous of you, and seeks to give you such a standing in the eyes of the young lady as to put you out of his way as a rival."

CHAPTER XX.

ABOUT an hour after the sheriff left the steamboat, a man came on board and asked to see Mr. Rob Rudder. He was shown upstairs, and Rob soon put in his appearance.

"I have been sent here by the sheriff," said the stranger, "who told me you wanted a good detective. Here is my card."

Bob motioned him to a seat, and then read on the card the name of

"THOMAS HUXTON, Detective."

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Huxton," said Rob. "I have a case on hand that gives me no end of trouble," and then he sat down and told the whole story of the terrible encounters he had with two men on the way down, both of them being suitors of a young lady passenger. One of them had been disposed of, and the other was then in the city, seeking to win the lady by fair means or foul.

"His name is Alex Grosvenor," he said, "and he is stopping at one of the big hotels in the city. I have reason to believe that he is the one who put old Dame Carew up to make the claim that I was her son, and then afterwards killed her to throw suspicion on me."

"What is the motive—jealousy?"

"Yes, I think so."

"What reason has he to be jealous of you?"

"I had the good fortune to save the young lady's life, and, as we became good friends after that, he no doubt thought we were about to fall in love with each other."

"You will excuse me, Mr. Rudder, if I intrude on delicate grounds. You see, I have to have good reason for believing a man guilty of a crime. When I am convinced that a real motive exists, I have always found but little trouble in working up a clew. Now you don't mind telling me if he had any good grounds for being jealous of you. Have you and the young lady come to any definite understanding?"

"No," said Rob, very promptly. "Nothing of that nature has ever passed between us."

"Well, now, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to shadow Grosvenor and see what he does, where he goes, and if he has any suspicious companions anywhere in this city."

"Very well. All that requires money, you know."

"Certainly. How much do you want?"

"I shall try to work my way into his confidence and get right into his game at once. That will make it a little more expensive. You had better give me your check for \$500."

Rob went to his desk and wrote out a check on his banker for that amount, signed it, and then handed it to him, with:

"I am willing to double that sum to bring the guilty man to justice."

When the detective left, Rob was not much impressed with him as a detective. But then, as the sheriff had sent him there, he made up his mind that he was probably as good a one as could be found in the city.

That evening, as he and old Dan Duncan were sitting on the deck of the steamer, engaged in conversation, a man was brought to him by the mate, who said:

"This gentleman wishes to see you, captain."

Rob turned quickly around, and saw a middle-aged man, neatly dressed, whose keen black eyes roved about and took in everything at a glance, standing close by his chair.

"Good-evening, sir," said Rob. "What can I do for you?"

"You are Captain Rudder?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"Very good. Here is a note from the sheriff, who sent me to deliver it to you in person," and he gave our hero a note which was inclosed in an unsealed envelope. Rob opened the note and went into the light to

read it. It was a note from the sheriff, introducing "Nick Sayles, the shrewdest detective in the Crescent City, who will attend to your case with more vigor than any man I know of."

Rob was amazed.

Was this a forgery, or was Tom Huxton a fraud?

"Step this way, please, Mr. Sayles," said Rob, as he drew Tom Huxton's card from his pocket.

Sayles stepped up to his side, and waited for him to speak.

"Do you know that man?" Rob asked, showing him Huxton's card.

"No," was the prompt reply. "There is no such detective in the city."

"Well, the sheriff left here this morning, promising to send me a good detective. An hour later a man came on board, gave me this card, and said he had been sent by the sheriff. I believed him, took him into my confidence, told him all about the case, and gave him a check for five hundred dollars. He went away, promising to report to-morrow or next day."

Sayles looked hard at him for a moment or two, and then said:

"You have been nicely played for a flat. That man is a sharper, whoever he is."

"Then I have been played. Now, I'll give another five hundred dollars to find out who the rascal is. Do you think you could find him?"

"I don't know. The fellow must have been disguised, of course, so your description would not amount to much. How tall was he?"

"I think he is about my height, but much heavier."

"To whom did you make the check payable?"

"To the order of Thomas Huxton."

"Yes? Well, we may be able to trace it up, but the chances are that you have lost five hundred dollars, and given your secret away to your enemy."

"Yes; and worst of all, I have found out that I am a fool."

"Oh, if you have found that out, your \$500 were well spent."

Rob glared at him in amazement.

"I don't mean anything personal," said Sayles. "When a man begins to find out that he is a fool, he is just beginning to learn wisdom. That's what I mean."

"Yes; I have heard that before, and I guess there is much truth in it."

"More truth in it than in any saying I know of. I'll have the sheriff come down here with me to-morrow morning and see you about this new case. He may have dropped a few words somewhere that gave that chap the clew that enabled him to play you so well. If so, he may be able to remember who was in hearing at the time."

"Yes; I wish to see him. Tell him to come down with you, please," and he shook hands with the detective, and saw him off the boat.

The next morning the sheriff came on board with Nick Sayles, and told Rob that he had sent no one but Sayles to him, and that no such detective as Thomas Huxton lived in the city.

"Nor did I utter a word about it to anybody but Sayles," he added, "so the villain must have picked up the points from some one else. You had better send down to the bank and stop the payment of that check, if it has not already been cashed."

"Ah! I never thought of that!" and Rob took up his hat and coat, and rushed out and over the gang-plank. "I'll see about that myself."

He hurried to the bank, and told his errand. The cashier said the check was cashed the day before, just before the close of business hours.

"Let me see it?" Rob asked. "Can I keep it?" he asked, after looking at the signature on the back of it a few moments.

"Yes, if you will give a receipt for it."

He did so, and came away with the canceled check in his pocket.

On the way back down to the boat he met Alex Grosvenor on the street. The latter spoke to him very pleasantly.

There was a wearied expression in Grosvenor's eyes that did not escape the watchful young pilot. He seemed to have spent a sleepless night from some cause or other, and a feeling of disquietude evidently held possession of him.

But Rob was not in the humor to talk with

him, and so he hurried away to the boat without so much as excusing himself to him.

When he reached the boat Rob found the sheriff and Sayles waiting for him in the clerk's cabin.

"Did you stop the check?" the sheriff asked. "No—it had been paid. Here it is," and he handed the canceled check to the two men, who took it and subjected it to a critical examination.

CHAPTER XXI.

"THIS may lead to the detection of the rascal," said Sayles, pointing to the signature of Thomas Huxton on the back of the check.

"How? The signature?"

"Yes, the handwriting."

"Ah! yes; so it may," and then they put their heads together and examined the lines of the letters as if they hoped to find in them some clew to the identity of the guilty one.

"Have you the signature of your passengers on your last trip down the river?" Sayles asked.

"Yes," he said, and he immediately called on the clerk for the register. The clerk soon produced the book, and Rob turned to the page where Grosvenor had registered under another name.

Nick Sayles took the register and carried it to the light, where he examined the handwriting of both signatures.

"They were written by the same hand," he said.

"That settles it," said Rob, his eyes flashing fire as he spoke. "I'll catch up with that scoundrel if I have to spend all my fortune to do it."

The sheriff and Sayles then went away, the latter to start at once on his work of shadowing the suspected man. Rob was alone in his room, looking at a picture, and dreaming of a future the anticipations of which set his bronzed face aglow, and put a happy light in his eyes.

That night the city was startled by the murder of a well-known character on the detective force. Mr. Nick Sayles, the best detective in the city, was found dead near the entrance to a dark alley, stabbed to the heart.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Rob, his face turning red and white by turns, "that is the work of that fiend. If he slew the old dame, why should he stop at other murders? If he is the one who passed on me as detective, he knows all my secrets in the case, and what I intended doing. He knows all, and therefore shadowed Sayles, instead of Sayles shadowing him. He will seek to put me out of the way next. That would leave the field clear for him. What shall I do? He may succeed in getting Belle in his power by some cunning trick, and that would be the last I would ever see of her. Ah! I now see what I must do. I will disguise myself and fall in with him. I think I can take care of myself at that kind of game. Being on my guard all the time, he won't get a chance to put me out of the way. Yes, I'll do it, and then send word to Belle not to go out of the house, under any circumstances, till she sees me."

Having made up his mind what to do, he sent for the boat's physician, and laid his plans before him.

"Now, I want you to go out and get me such a disguise as I want, doctor," he said.

Seeing that he was not to be dissuaded from his purpose, the doctor went out and made a purchase of a disguise such as Rob had suggested to him as suitable. He had it put up, and brought it back with him.

While he was gone for the disguise Rob sat down and wrote to Belle Swayne.

"After again thanking you for your kindness," the note said, "I would ask that you do not leave the house of your friends under any consideration till you see me in person. If a note comes to you purporting to be from me, don't believe it. The fiend is at work, and may seek to get you in his power. I am doing my best to unravel the mystery and bring the guilty ones to justice. Every moment is fraught with danger to you. Keep in doors and wait till you see me. Ever your faithful friend,

"ROB RUDDER."

This note he sealed and addressed to Miss Belle Swayne at the residence of the relative with whom she was stopping in the Crescent City. Then he called old Dan Duncan, the sturdy old day pilot of the Osceola,

"Dan," he said, "I want you to do me a favor."

"Yes, and you know well that I will do it," said the bluff old fellow. "What is it, lad?"

"Take this note to Miss Swayne and put it into her own hand, or see that she gets it."

Old Dan went away as soon as he could put on his coat and hat, and Rob went into his cabin to prepare for the disguise the doctor was to bring in with him.

In a little while the doctor came in with a bundle which he gave to the young pilot. Rob proceeded at once to don the disguise. It took him two hours to get it down fine, so as to make himself appear natural and at ease in it.

But he succeeded at last, and when he called the doctor in, the latter was amazed at the complete transformation that had taken place.

"You will be safe in that," he said, "if your voice or sunburnt face don't give you away."

"I don't mind the color of the face," said the young hero, "if I can change my voice."

"Why, you have done that already! But where will you go to find your man? He may be in disguise, too, you know."

"I'll have to find out all that," said Rob, after a careful inspection of himself in his little mirror again.

Just then old Dan returned and asked for Rob.

"Did you see her, Dan?" Rob asked, in his natural tone of voice.

The old man gave a sudden start and exclaimed:

"Sink me, if it isn't the lad! Yes, I saw her, and just in time to save her from the rascals."

"How? What do you mean?"

"When I got there a carriage was standing before the gate, with a burly driver up on the seat. I met her at the door, just as she was coming out, all dressed to kill. She knew me, and quickly asked:

"Oh, Mr. Duncan, do tell me how Mr. Rudder is? Is he really much hurt?"

"Yes, ma'am," said I, 'your bright eyes have hurt him badly. He sent this note to you,' and I gave her the note."

"Just as the young lady opened the note, the man on the carriage driver's seat whipped up his horses and dashed away at almost full speed. The lady read the note, and exclaimed: 'Thank God!' in the sweetest voice I ever heard in my life. Then she pulled me into the house, and almost killed me with questions, and said a man had come in the carriage, saying you had been badly hurt, and had sent for her to come to you. She was going out to the carriage when I met her at the door."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Rob, his voice almost inaudible through emotion. "I was just in time with that note of warning. Now I am ready for the work of vengeance. I'll run that villain down or die in the attempt. Did she send me any word, Dan?"

"Did she? Well, I should say she did. I can't remember half she said. But she said she would follow your instructions if she had to stay in the house forever."

CHAPTER XXII.

Rob would have asked the old man a good many more questions about his visit to the young lady had the doctor not been present to twist him about the affair.

As it was, he did ask a few more questions about the man who was in charge of the carriage. The old pilot had not taken very particular notice of him, for the reason that he had no reason to suspect him until he saw him dash away from the place at full speed. But he recollected that the man had red whiskers, and looked like an ordinary carriage driver.

Rob then went out and ashore. Not one on board knew him save Dan and the doctor. The deck-hands saw him, and wondered who he was. But in another minute he was lost in the crowd that usually gathered about the wharves.

Sauntering slowly about, as if he had nothing to do, he made his way to the hotel where Grosvenor was stopping. He thought that maybe he might see him, either in disguise or in his natural self. He reasoned that if the one in charge of the carriage Dan saw in front of Belle's residence was Grosvenor in disguise, he would naturally return to change the disguise.

He reasoned very sensibly, too, as the sequel proved. Not more than ten minutes passed after he arrived at the hotel ere he saw a man with red whiskers make his appearance, with a bundle under his arm.

"Ah!" he muttered to himself, as he caught sight of the man, "he has brought another disguise, and is going to make a change. I'll know that ring on the third finger of your left hand if you come down in another shape. By that means I will know that you are Alex Grosvenor."

The man made his way up-stairs, and our hero placed himself in a position where he could see the left hand of every man who descended the stairs. He kept his position for about an hour, when he saw a man descending the stairs, on whose third left-hand finger sparkled the ring he was looking for. There was no mistake about the ring, but there was a complete change in the make-up of the man.

The man passed into the bar-room of the hotel and called for a drink. There were quite a number of men in there, some of them more or less under the influence of drink. Our hero very quietly went in and kept his eye on his game. He saw that he was a stranger to even the barkeeper who gave him a glance that plainly said:

"I never saw you before."

He called for his drink, and in paying for it a man much under the influence of liquor staggered up against him with such force as to knock his pocket-book out of his hand.

"Take that, you loafer!" he hissed, dealing the half-tipsy man a hard blow with his clenched fist.

The blow sobered the man in a moment. He straightened himself up and drew a pistol. Grosvenor turned deathly pale as the man got the drop on him. Another moment and he would have received a bullet in his heart. Just in the nick of time Rob sprang forward, caught the man by the arm and pushed it upward. The pistol exploded and the ball was buried in the ceiling overhead. The next moment Rob had wrenched the weapon from the desperado's hand.

Grosvenor was unharmed, but he was too much dumfounded to move or utter a word for a moment or two. The crowd seized his foe and hustled him out of the room.

"I don't know the gentleman," said Grosvenor, turning to our hero, "but I thank him from the bottom of my heart for his timely interference. It was all done so quick that I had no time to defend myself. There's my hand, sir. My name is Cameron. I am glad to know you."

Rob took the proffered hand and recognized the voice of Alex Grosvenor; but he shook the hand bravely, and said:

"I couldn't stand by and see a man shot down without having a fair show. My name is Thrasher. I don't belong down this way—came from Arkansaw."

"Arkansaw, eh?" said Cameron. "I never saw a man from Arkansaw that wouldn't drink like a gentleman. What will you have, Mr. Thrasher?"

"I'll take a little brandy, if you please," said Rob, who saw that it was necessary to keep up appearances.

"Give me whisky straight," said Grosvenor; and then, as he saw about a score standing around looking on, added: "And then set 'em up for the crowd."

The whole crowd drank to both Rob and the man who was paying for the drinks, and a general good feeling prevailed.

Rob turned about after a while and directed his conversation to Cameron.

"Do you live here in the city?" he asked.

"I do now," was the reply; "but I have not always lived here."

"You know something about the city, then?"

"Oh, yes. I am pretty well acquainted with the city."

"Then I hope you will show me some of the sights when you have time."

"With pleasure. Where are you stopping?"

"Here, at this house."

"So am I."

"Then we shall see each other often, I hope."

They both took cigars, and then strolled out of the place together. There was no studied attempt to push himself forward, and so Cameron was utterly unsuspecting of him. He even asked him to take a walk with him, and together they strolled down the street. They neared the river in the vicinity of the

wharf where the Osceola was moored. Rob noticed that his companion cast furtive glances at the boat, and, after a while, asked:

"What boat did you come down on?"

"The Crenshaw," was the prompt reply, "and a very good boat it is too."

"Did you ever travel on the Osceola?"

"No—never did."

"It's a splendid boat. There she is now. Her captain was killed on her last trip down."

"How?"

"The steamer was racing with another, and as the Osceola passed her rival, the latter's boiler exploded. A piece of the boiler or timber, I don't know which, struck the captain and two of his passengers, killing all three of them instantly."

"Ah! I heard of that. One of them was a Judge Swayne, of Tennessee, was he not?"

"Yes—that's the name. The judge was buried here in this city, where he originally lived, I believe."

"That reminds me of what I read in the papers about the judge's daughter. She tried to commit suicide, did she not, and was prevented from doing so by the young pilot, who leaped into the water and saved her?"

"Yes, that's the story," said the villain, with a hard look in his face. "But the young pilot or some of his friends made himself out a greater hero than he is."

"How so?"

"She was in no danger of drowning, in the first place; and in the second place, he has tried to pose as having sprung from a respectable family."

"Yes—seems to me I did hear something about that. Some old woman claimed him as her son, I heard."

"Yes, and he denied his mother and drove her from the boat. She denounced him and hurled a mother's curse at him. The next morning the old dame was found murdered in her humble home, by some unknown assassin. Public opinion, however, fastens the guilt on the unnatural son. He may never be punished for the crime, because there were no witnesses, but public opinion will always follow him to condemn him."

"Why don't the people lynch him, as we do in Arkansas? Why, we wouldn't have waited two hours if he had killed his mother in old Arkansas before we'd have him strung up to a limb. That's the way we do such chaps up our way."

"He would have been served that way here if any bold spirit had started the idea. I would have done it myself if any one had backed me."

"I'll back you every time," said our hero, and Cameron grasped his hand.

CHAPTER XXIII.

As Cameron grasped his hand, he exclaimed:

"Then it may not be too late yet. The young villain is moving about the city, defying public opinion in a brazen way that ought to make law-abiding citizens rise up and howl. Some think that he may have hired some one to do it, and then had witnesses to swear that he was on board the boat, or somewhere else at the time."

"Yes, it looks that way," and the young pilot looked up at the splendid boat which had fallen to him since the untimely death of the captain.

"Are you acquainted with the young pilot?" he asked.

"No—I only know him by sight."

"I wonder if he is on board now? I would like to see him."

"He may be. Shall we go on board and see?"

"Yes, if you can frame a good excuse for doing so."

"Oh, we can claim to have a desire to see the boat about which so much has been said of late."

"Will that do?"

"Oh, yes. They are very fond of the notoriety they have obtained. Come on!"

The hardened villain led the way on board, and boldly asked to see the captain.

"The captain is out in the city," replied the clerk. "What can we do for you?"

"We merely came to see the boat," said Cameron, "out of curiosity, having heard so much about her."

The clerk showed them all over the splendid steamer, not having the least suspicion that one of the visitors was the owner of it.

"When will the captain be on board?" Rob asked of the clerk.

"We are expecting him back every minute," was the reply.

"I would like very much to see him," said Rob. "People all over the city are talking about him, and he has grown to be quite famous."

"Yes," said the clerk, "he is every inch a man."

"But what is he going to do about the murder of the old woman?" Cameron asked.

"Oh, he will try to find out who is at the bottom of that," was the reply.

"It looks rather bad for him at present, does it not?"

"No."

Cameron gave Rob a glance that had a significance he could not mistake. Rob smiled and said:

"I hope you will succeed in bringing the truth to the surface. It was a terrible crime and a cowardly one."

"I should say it was," assented Cameron. "But suppose we go, Thrasher? The captain may not be back for several hours."

In half an hour's time Grosvenor was well under the influence of liquor, and very communicative.

Rob played the part of a friend to perfection, and finally had to carry him back to the hotel and put him to bed.

He then registered himself as a Mr. Thrasher, of Arkansas, and took a room near Cameron.

The next day Cameron sought his acquaintance of the night before by looking over the register. He saw his name there, and immediately hunted him up. Rob was reading the morning paper. He arose, shook hands with him, and then they strolled out together on the street.

"I was pretty full last night," remarked Cameron.

"Yes, but you are all right this morning."

"Oh, yes—just a little head on me, that's all. I'll be all right after a little walk. How did I get to the hotel?"

"I brought you in."

"Ah, I thought so. You were unusually kind to me last night and yesterday."

"Well, circumstances threw us together. I am glad that I was able to be of service to you or any other man."

"That shows you are a good fellow. I am glad I have met up with you. Will you have something?"

"Not now, thanks. I am not in the habit of drinking, and would prefer not to drink in the morning."

"I guess you are right. I would be better off if I had never touched drink. Guess I'll swear off. I say, Thrasher, I am in need of just such a friend to stand by me in a love scrape. You have nerve and pluck, and are just the friend I want. Can I depend on you in a little elopement case?"

"Thunder, yes!" exclaimed our hero. "Last year I stole two girls right out from under the noses of their parents and delivered 'em to their sweethearts, who married 'em right away. I had to exchange shots with an infuriated brother, on account of one of the runaways."

"Bully for you. I want you to steal my girl for me. You will be surprised when you hear who she is."

"Well, who is she?"

"The same young lady whose life was saved by that young pilot, Rudder."

"And you are acquainted with her?"

"Why, yes. We have been engaged for a long time. She is anxious to become my wife, but her friends and relatives restrain her because I am too fast, they say."

"And is she willing to go?"

"Oh, yes. You will have to take her a letter from me, and she will come in a carriage to a certain house, where we will be married at once."

"Oh, I can work that well enough, I guess. Of course you will pay me my usual fee in such cases?"

"What is that?"

"Why, allow me to have the first kiss from the bride."

"Oh, that's all right. I won't object to such a reasonable charge as that," and the arch-villain laughed in good-natured glee.

"Well, when shall I have the pleasure of stealing her away from her friends?"

"Say to-morrow night. I will have everything in readiness for you by that time."

Two hours later he left Cameron and re-

turned to the Osceola. The doctor and old Dan were uneasy about him till they saw him come aboard.

"Did you find your man?" the doctor asked, as soon as they were alone together.

"Yes, and I am going to get him into the nicest little trap you ever saw. But I want you and Dan to disguise yourselves and help me."

"Of course. We'll only be too glad to do so."

After changing his disguise for his best Sunday suit, Rob went out again and entered a carriage. He was driven rapidly away. When the carriage halted it was in front of the elegant mansion where Belle Swayne was stopping.

Rob alighted and rang the bell.

A servant admitted him.

She carried his name to the young lady, and in another minute or two Belle came in, her face glowing with blushes, and her eyes beaming with the light of a kindly welcome to the daring young pilot.

"Oh, Mr. Rudder!" she exclaimed, as she ran forward and extended both her hands toward him. "You don't know how glad I am to see you!"

"I—I—want—you—to be our captain—my captain—my wife! Belle, I love you better than life itself. Will you be my wife?"

She had expected it. She knew it would come to that some day, and was not taken by surprise.

"Yes," she said, giving him her hand.

"There's my hand, and my heart is in it. I love you, my hero, and have ever since you took me out of the river. I have nothing more to desire. I am so happy!"

Rob could not speak for joy.

He opened wide his arms, and she sprang into them. Their lips met in their first kiss of love.

"My darling," he said, "I am too happy to live!"

She nestled close to his bosom, and both could hear the flutterings of their hearts.

An hour sacred to the tenderest emotions of their souls was spent, and then the happy young pilot told her the story of his efforts to bring Alex Grosvenor to justice.

She gave a shudder at the bare mention of the villain's name.

"I once had a great respect for that man," she said, "but now I loathe him."

"Yes. He has added murder to his other crimes. If he is not brought to justice there will always be people who will believe me the son of that old woman, as well as the instigator of her taking off. I am on his track. He has taken me into his confidence because he believes me to be a man by the name of Thrasher, from Arkansas. I was disguised as such. He has asked me to steal you away from here and bring you to him. You must go with me. The doctor and old Dan will be on hand to aid us. I have a plan that will make him acknowledge his guilt."

"Oh, I will do anything you say," she said, "and go anywhere with you."

"Thanks, my darling; I will see that no harm shall come to you."

CHAPTER XXIV.

Rob returned to the boat, reported to the doctor and old Dan, and ordered them to get good disguises and be ready when he should call for them at evening the next day.

That matter arranged he put on his disguise as the man from Arkansas, and prepared to return to the hotel where Grosvenor was stopping.

That evening the arch-villain came back to the hotel and told him that he had arranged with a certain obscure hotel up the river-side, near the outskirts of the city, for a room for himself and bride, and that the marriage was to take place privately there just as soon as he could get Belle in his power.

Thus the matter was arranged, and our hero left the hotel to give the arch-villain a chance to concoct the letter he was to deliver to Belle Swayne as a decoy.

He did not see him again until that evening. Where Cameron had been in the meantime he did not know. It did not matter as Rob had gotten the matter in the shape he wanted it, and desired nothing better than to have it carried out as agreed.

"Have you got the letter ready?" Rob asked him, when they were alone together.

"No. I will write it when I go up to my room," was the reply, "and you can have it in the morning."

"Then I will go to my room. I am quite sleepy," and Rob arose and made a movement to go to his room.

"Hold on," said Cameron, detaining him. "Let's have a drink before we part."

"I don't care anything about drinking," said Rob. "The more I drink the worse I feel. Good-night," and in spite of Cameron's pressing invitation to take something, he made his way up-stairs to his room, where he remained till he heard the breakfast bell the next morning.

He met Cameron at the breakfast table. The latter was quite elated over the prospects of becoming the master of the beautiful young heiress.

"Have you written the letter?" Rob asked at the table.

"Yes, and everything is ready."

"Well, then, when shall I go for her?"

"Whenever you please. I shall go to the place after breakfast and remain there till you come. You know where the place is?"

"Yes; your directions were plain enough."

"Very good! Here is the letter," and he handed him a sealed envelope which was addressed to—

"MISS BELLE SWAYNE,
— Street,
"New Orleans."

Rob noticed the handwriting on the envelope, and was amazed at finding his own style so well imitated as to deceive himself. Had he not known that it was not his hand, he would have believed that it was, under other circumstances.

He shook hands with the villain and agreed to meet him at the Crescent Hotel, the disreputable house to which he was instructed to bring the intended victim. Then he hastened back to the boat and gave the doctor and old Dan final instructions what to do. Both of them at once proceeded to don their disguises and arm themselves. At the time agreed on, they set out on foot for the Crescent Hotel, more than two miles away.

Rob saw them off and then began his own preparations. He locked himself in his cabin and tore open the letter Cameron had given to him to hand to Belle Swayne.

It read as follows:

"If you would see me once more in this life, come to me at the house of a friend, who will

call for you. I am very ill, and hardly able to write these lines. I have something I wish to say to you before I die.

"Your best friend,
"ROB RUDDER."

"The villain!" hissed Rob, as he read the lines. "I have him now, even if I do not find proof of his murder of old Dame Carew!"

He put the letter in his pocket and hastened to complete his arrangements to carry out the scheme he had on hand.

Ten minutes later he was on his way to the residence of Belle Swayne, driving a carriage. When he reached the house, he went to the door, and was admitted by the servant.

Belle was soon by his side.

"Oh, I would never know you!" she exclaimed, when she heard his loved voice.

He caught her in his arms and pressed her to his heart.

"But your heart knew me?"

"Yes, my heart told me it was my hero," and she returned his kiss.

"Come, then, if you are ready. I need not show you the note now; you can read it in the carriage."

She ran to her room, and in a few minutes returned ready to accompany him. He led her out to the carriage, and in another moment they were going at a rapid pace to the place of rendezvous.

When they reached the Crescent Hotel, Rob saw old Dan and the doctor there as old tramps, and knew that they were prepared to do his bidding at the proper time.

After she alighted, the landlord came forward and asked:

"Are you the lady as was sent for by the wounded gentleman?"

"Yes," said Belle; "I am Miss Swayne. Let me see him as quick as possible. How is he?"

"Very bad, mum—very bad! This way, please."

She gave Rob a look, who nodded to her to go on and follow him. She did so, and Rob followed her up the narrow stairs into a large back room. There she was shown to a seat and told to wait until she could see the gentleman.

The landlord went out, and a moment or two later Cameron came in. Belle looked at him, wondering who he was. He quietly re-

moved the wig and beard that had so well concealed his identity, and stood revealed as Alex Grosvenor.

"Why, Mr. Grosvenor!" exclaimed Belle, in well-feigned surprise; "what does this mean?"

"It means that you are in my power, Belle Swayne, and that when you leave this house you go as my wife."

"Never!" she cried. "I would die first! I hate, detest, abhor you, Alex Grosvenor!"

"Ah! I know all that, my haughty beauty, but little do I care for your hate. You have spurned my love and turned me into a demon. You are mine now, and mine you shall be. You cannot escape. Gold has secured all in this house to my interest. You will fare better by yielding with as good grace as possible."

"Did you write this letter?" she asked, exhibiting the letter Rob had given her.

"Yes," he answered; "I wrote it and signed his name to it. It answered my purpose well—ha, ha, ha!"

Rob threw off his disguise and leveled a pistol at the miscreant's head, hissing:

"So it did—and mine, too!"

The wretch was so utterly dumfounded that he staggered back against the wall gasping for breath.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Rob, as old Dan and the doctor came in. "I have witnesses of your confession of the forgery. You are not only a forger, Alexander Grosvenor, but a murderer as well. You put old Dame Carew up to making that claim on me, and then murdered her!"

"Yes, he did it," said Belle. "He is mean enough to do anything. He did it to make me believe you did it, Rob. I believe in you, and am ready to be your wife at any time."

Grosvenor gave a howl of rage, and drawing a derringer, clapped the muzzle to his head and fired.

A cry of terror escaped Belle, and Rob wheeled and caught her in his arms. Grosvenor was dead in a couple of minutes.

Reader, our story is ended. As a matter of course, Rob and Belle were married soon after the death of the villain. They left the river, and are yet living in wealth and high social position in New Orleans, where the story of the Young Pilot is often told.

[THE END.]

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